

Worlds in Collision: Music and the Trauma of War

Saturday 29 June 2013, The Mansion House

TRANSCRIPT

War Poetry and Song Settings – Stephen Johnson with Adrian Thompson and Anna Tilbrook

STEPHEN JOHNSON: We have something now which is part discussion and part concert. I am joined by Adrian Thompson and his accompanist Anna Tilbrook, both with very considerable experience of English song, particularly the English romantic composers at the beginning of the 20th century and we are looking at two of those who both in their separate way was casualties of World War I. George Butterworth because he was killed at a very young age indeed, having written a few highly promising, well, more than promising, masterpieces actually, and Ivor Gurney who wasn't killed but whose mental health never really recovered after World War I although it is an interesting question to what extent the seeds of instability were already sown in Gurney and to what extent he had already shown signs of mental problems before World War I. Indeed, it has been argued that his period at the trenches was possibly the stablest period of his life, that actually, being in the middle of the theatre of war gave him a focus and discipline which actually he often lacked and felt the need of in his life beforehand, an interesting point for debate. It's certainly interesting to compare what happened in terms of their music. Fascinating too, isn't it, we're hearing about soldiers today, I think most soldiers today, we gather, if we were to talk about maybe sending them off volumes of poetry to console them at the front in Afghanistan and Iraq, you would be met by deluges of derisive laughter and yet that is what many soldiers did in the First World War. This was an era when high ranking military figures were quite proud to show their sensitivity in the form of being avid poetry readers or lovers of classical music or whatever else, so that's an interesting change in itself which is worthy of reflection. Even in World War II I learnt there were Russian soldiers going off to the front with volumes of poetry under their arms, which again is something fascinating to confront, to contrast with our age where the iPod seems to be the principal source of consolation for many soldiers.

But we will start with George Butterworth. He was regarded as an immensely promising young composer before he was posted to the front, a great friend of Vaughan Williams, in fact his death was an enormous shock to Vaughan Williams and Vaughan Williams carried on in many ways responding to Butterworth's death in many of his elegiac and more troubled works after the war, but we are going to hear two songs. First of all a rather beautiful song called "Loveliest of Trees" which is very typical of the kind of imagery that some soldiers found consoling at the front. An image of a tree in full bloom, very much associated with the English pastoral landscape, which was important in the work of these people. Adrian, when you are singing music like this, this is a song in which there is nothing that you could immediately see as war imagery, absolutely not, in fact it is deeply not there, and yet do you feel that knowledge of where and when it was written and for what purpose, this background, do you think that is important for you when you sing it?

ADRIAN THOMPSON: I don't know whether it is that important when you are singing it because the Butterworth settings were written before the war, they were written in 1912, so I think we invest them with - because the fact that Butterworth was killed in 1916 - we invest those songs with perhaps a little more weight than Butterworth would have thought. Unless he had some premonition, which I doubt, I think it is us that have been left behind, that have put them in a different category.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: It is interesting when we come to the second song, just how very easy it is to have the let the backwards shadow of World War I fall across the music.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: That is the Housman poem, "The Lads in Their Hundreds". It is very prophetic in the respect that it is talking about all the lads in the village that we see coming down from Ludlow or from the countryside to enjoy the facilities that the town gives them. They are going to stay forever young, never grow old, that's the big thing.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Because they won't last long; because they won't come back.

ANNA TILLBROOK: On that point, as you mentioned earlier, there were, I think, thousands and thousands of soldiers that took away with them in their knapsacks the poetry, the Shropshire Lad was very popular. Even though the music was written after the war, knowing that so many soldiers read these poems, probably daily to reminisce and think back to their homeland and their countryside and everything, just knowing that gives me an impetus into it.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Up until World War I every generation had seen thousands slaughtered in some war or other, because we were pretty busy on the world stage.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: Imagine, the young men of England of a certain class would never have travelled even out of their villages, so another county was a strange place to them, in England. And they are put somewhere where people don't speak English, and then they are in the middle of this carnage. It must have been so incredibly unreal that they must have thought they had gone to hell, it was incredible, everything was so different, on every level, not only was it a foreign country but people were trying to kill them.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: That is a good point at which to hear this utter contrast with what you have described, the imagery that sustained these young men at the front. "Loveliest of Trees" by George Butterworth.

[Adrian Thompson and Anna Tilbrook perform *Loveliest of Trees*]

STEPHEN JOHNSON: So we turn to the second of these songs, the one with this haunting image of the lads in their hundreds who will never grow old. We'll be talking a little later about Ivor Gurney and about how different he is, but what sort of impressions do you gain of Butterworth the man from working with his music? Would you think about that at all? He is quite an interestingly shadowy figure from

the biographical information. This is a man with a terrific lyrical gift, his songs are very well balanced, aren't they - they are very sharp and contained.

ANNA TILLBROOK: Yes, clearly formed and often sort of strophic with slight changes. Certainly with all of these, they are quite simple, I would say, compared to what happens in Gurney, which we will come on to. But certainly *The Lads In Their Hundreds* is almost hypnotic.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: Butterworth writes a far more vocal line than Gurney. The Gurney songs are far more intricate and in a way the vocal lines are a bit more tortured and you have to work. Whereas with Butterworth they are songs that somebody walking along the street could hum without too much trouble.

ANNA TILLBROOK: There is a slight folk song influence as well. The simplicity of the tune, whereas as you say in Gurney, I use the word "angular", the vocal lines and the piano writing. It can start off very beautiful and simple and then it goes crazy, whereas with the Butterworth there is drama there but it is more formed.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: You are saying you are hearing something in Gurney that tends to bear out the idea that maybe he was already a little on the edge before this war experience started. Certainly the music he wrote after the war does, you were saying Anna about at one stage how sudden the changes can be in Gurney.

ANNA TILLBROOK: Yes, in his cycle *Ludlow and Team*, every song starts, like *Far In A Western Brookland*. It starts simply and within a few seconds you are off on some quite scary journey. The music gets so chromatic and so explosive.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: I tell you what, since we are building up this rather nicely why not do the Gurney next and go back to Butterworth at the end. It might make the afternoon more constructive. This is called "In Flanders", this is very poignant because he knew the part of the country I am getting to know extremely well, having lived in Herefordshire for nearly 15 years now. Like many, the extraordinary profile of the Malvern Hills which stand out wherever you look, this mini-set of alps, in the middle of this rolling English countryside, it's quite bizarre, Elgar loved looking at them from Worcester, Gurney from the other end, from Gloucester.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: There is also a place in Gloucestershire called Chosen Hill, where all of that generation of composers, Vaughan Williams, Finzi a bit later.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: The wonderful Howell's piano quartet has a movement dedicated to it.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: It's this hill outside of Gloucester and there is a road which seems to go up to nowhere and then at the top there is a little church, and a scattering of houses, but there you get the most fantastic view down onto Gloucester and the countryside, and that was another place where the countryside was so important. That is why it was unflattering called the Cow Pat School because it was so important to the composers of that early 20th century.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Now we find the soldier in Flanders, in the midst of all this horror and this song remembering that world. And fascinating the way that the rather seemingly peaceful outer sections frame something in the middle which is much more disturbed, isn't it. This is "In Flanders" by Ivor Gurney.

[Adrian Thompson and Anna Tilbrook perform *In Flanders*]

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Yes, it's much harder to take away a sense of a shape in that piece immediately. Butterworth presents you with a very clear form, doesn't he? But there you noticed the details. I loved the touch of the "jagged Malvern Hills", there is that ba-dum rhythm in it.

ANNA TILLBROOK: It always seems to be the case, it starts in a similar way to Butterworth and then takes you off somewhere.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: You feel something sparks in his head and makes him go on to do almost something completely different when you feel you are settled in the song.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: He just manages to pull you back to the mood of the opening of the end. It is almost like, oh, yes, that is where we started!

ADRIAN THOMPSON: With Gurney, he set most of these poems out of his head. Often there are huge numbers of mistakes in the text, but I always sing the words that Gurney wrote even if they are not the words that the poet wrote because that is what he had in his head, there is no point in changing the words. Often they were only things instead of "their", "his", or something like that but often they are more important words, and I feel it is really important to do that.

ANNA TILLBROOK: The poignancy I feel with this song, because it is marked at the end of the music, it was written in January 1917, Crucifix Corner, and just the number of times he says "my hills again", you get it twice at the beginning and then it comes back at the end. I find that so poignant, the desperation comes through so powerfully.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: It is interesting, I have recently heard some of Gurney's later music, which isn't often performed, an orchestral work called *Elegy* for instance, that spikiness and sense of change is so disconcerting that you feel he has lost the sense of the whole all together, it has broken down. Very poignant.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: His family tried to hold him together, his brother was actually very domineering, and of course Gurney was useless with money. He was always asking people for money. And there were always so many problems. His brother kept trying to give him work and make him work in the family firm and all that kind of stuff. It was his sister, Florence, she was the one that visited him and was kinder to him. But I think it was it Dora the wife of Herbert Howell she visited him in the various institutions he went into.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Which was quite enlightened for those times, I think the tendency used to be just forget people in that position.

ANNA TILBROOK: I don't know the number of songs that we still have of Gurney, isn't it right he destroyed an enormous number when he was in the hospitals that he was in. He wrote songs and then he didn't want the public to see them and he just destroyed them. It would be fascinating to see what was lost.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Some almost private therapeutic process, like that extraordinary improvisation we heard yesterday, which is still haunting me I must say. We turn to Butterworth for the last song, "The Lads In Their Hundreds", this is a quite a simple and clear, lucid song compared to the Gurney.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: It is interesting that the Housman poetry, so much of Housman's poetry is all about young men, when they reach a certain age and then the betrayal, it is almost a sort of loss of innocence in a way. Which of course this is something that later composers, like Britten were hooked on, the loss of innocence, Housman features it all the time. So many songs in the Vaughan Williams set as well, "On Wenlock Edge", they always tend to be that somebody has been betrayed or died. It is always at this young, early 20s time, because that is when most of our soldiers are killed at that age.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: It does put an interesting different slant on Britten's fascination with this, from the one that is normally affixed to it. Maybe we should hear this last song of George Butterworth.

[Adrian Thompson and Anna Tilbrook perform *The Lads In Their Hundreds*]

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Okay then, over to you for questions, if there's anything you'd like to ask any of us, particularly our performers. Ian, always keen!

IAN RITCHIE: Thank you – beautiful. I wanted to just remind everybody that the songs we have just heard are a taster for the concert at 6.00, and we hear the four Gurney songs that he actually wrote he was in the trenches and two Butterworth songs. A little bit about the poems. I love this idea of all these men going off to war with their packs full of poetry and clearly the poems that Gurney used - well, one was his own, one was by Will Harvey, a fellow soldier who had gone missing, and Walter Raleigh as well, I think. Were these poems that he would have taken with him or remembered from home, do you think?

ADRIAN THOMPSON: I think a lot of them were in his head. Like a lot of young artists of that era, he immersed himself in English poetry.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: But he did have a pretty prodigious memory as well.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: Yes, so the odd word-slips can easily be forgiven when they are all stored in his head.

ANNA TILBROOK: In a lot of the scores, they give the alternative word.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: Yes, they put the real word underneath.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: But I think there is such a thing as a creative misremembering as well, so we ought to honour what they come up with.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: Having said that, in Ludlow and Team, which is the cycle for tenor and string quartet and piano, there are so many mistakes, musically as well, it's quite a job to work out - he wasn't always so careful when he wrote things out, what he really wanted, or maybe he just changed it and then the bit got changed and another bit didn't, so there's quite a discrepancy really.

ANNA TILBROOK: Philip Lancaster has recently brought out a new edition and he has really tried to get back to the original, and make it work.

IAN RITCHIE: I promise to pass on to somebody else in a second but I just wanted to say something in support of trees. We were talking about the "Loveliest of Trees" and how it was not really to do with the war, but Trees actually is one of the themes we have picked up for the City of London Festival in the conflict and resolution context because in fact trees really suffered incredible damage during all these conflicts in the First World War, just forests completely destroyed, in Dubrovnik, the walls were not actually damaged too badly but the entire historic arboretum went, so there is something rather nice about having the Loveliest of Trees kept in our mind.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: When you see the images, those First World War films, when you see the news reel or whatever, and you see these broken stumps of trees, and nothing to be seen for mile after mile but mud and the rest of it, then you can imagine how you needed a poem to remind you perhaps of what things do look like when you are not in the middle of that conflict.

FLOOR: This is just an observation, and I don't know whether it's at all accurate but I have been told, having visited St Petersburg a great deal, that when the siege of Leningrad ended and there was the scorched earth policy, what are called the suburban palaces were burnt, they burnt all the trees so within a radius of 30 or 40 miles of St Petersburg there aren't trees that are older than 70 years. It was absolutely - it was almost like - it was raping the countryside.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Yes, quite.

FLOOR: I just wanted to say that on the memorial, there is a database there run by an English couple and there is a huge file on Butterworth which I will print off for you but I'm going to put something on about William Manson, photographs, songs and other things, after whom the Royal Academy's Manson Ensemble and Manson Room are named, if anyone else wants the address for any other musician who was there and would like to contribute, I will give you the database people's name, and I think part of the treaty of Versailles, as I understood, also had something to do with German reparations and the rebuilding of forests in France.

FLOOR: Thank you very much for a whole interesting day, I would however like some reassurance that our national anthem hasn't changed, it's been worrying me all day, we might think Rule Britannia would be a better national anthem, but that hasn't happened, has it? I want to ask whether, as we've now heard some voices, would participating in a choir have the same effect as listening to music, for people? And

then my last question is, the great cyber war that we are all going to have, is sitting in one continent pressing a button that deals with another continent 4,000 miles away, is that going to be less traumatic for the person pressing the button?

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Oh, goodness me. I think we can honestly say that none of us feel remotely competent to answer any of those questions except that I rather like Billy Connolly's suggestion, that we should use the Archers theme tune as our national anthem. What on earth all that stuff is going to do to the nature of war, I suspect it will bring different kinds of traumas, except for the people on the receiving end, of course, which is another matter. That's something that doesn't seem to change.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: Can I just say, there is a wonderful memorial to Butterworth, in Radley school, was he a pupil - I think he taught there, he was a music master. Anyway, there is a fantastic memorial made up of broken glass in the school at Radley, in the music department, I forget what it is called, and there are some fragments of manuscript in that, it's one of the Houseman settings, I think. But it's a most beautiful memorial and if you just look at it, I defy anybody not to be absolutely, wow, it takes your breath away.

FLOOR: Just to offer a quick answer to the lady's two questions, from a simple scientific point of view, yes, there is quite a lot of evidence that singing in choirs helps you and your body, the lovely hormone which women secrete to lactate, oxytocin, is in all of us, and singing in choirs is particularly provocative of oxytocin, the well-being feelings, if that helps. Not that a chemical explains your feelings, but rather that at least we can measure that. On the question of the cyber war, there is also a body of evidence - Susan Greenfield is very good on this - that we are indeed preparing our kids to fight this war because they are all busy on their machines and Xboxes killing zombies and one another at the push of a button so the desensitisation process in preparation for such a war is already advancing.

ANNA TILBROOK: Just on Nigel's point, I sing in a choir and our choir took part in a study that a friend of mine did, she is a neuroscientist and does various things but she took swabs from all of us, and tested it for cortisol, and it was unanimous from everybody in the choir that our stress went down, the cortisol levels went down, on every single person in the study, so absolute proof. They took the swab before the choir practice and after. In every single person, the degrees were obviously variable, but the stress levels went down.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: I have just remembered, I don't know if any of you know an extraordinarily powerful short piece by Schoenberg written shortly after the Second World War called A Survivor from Warsaw, it's a truly horrific piece, it's mostly related to the Schoenbergian Sprechstimme, 'speech song', about a man's narration of escaping with his life from one of the ghettos in Warsaw, and the truly amazing moment describes the redemptive moment, when he says that all the people started to sing, and suddenly the chorus comes belting in, and I think it's almost a viscerally powerful reminder, Nigel is nodding, of just how extraordinary music can be, even in extreme situations like that. Reducing maybe the stress for these people in this appalling situation.

ADRIAN THOMPSON: You have only got to think of the famous example of the musicians aboard the Titanic, playing as the ship went under the waves, it's to try and calm everybody down, so music does have that power, to do so many things. And to take us out of the situation into somewhere else, however short that may be, but it takes you away from the immediacy of what's happening.

STEPHEN JOHNSON: Black American spirituals too. A lot has been written about coded messages in these, and all sorts of other things, but you can't get away from the idea that they must have been an intense source of relief for the people involved. I think that is all we have time for. Thank you very much indeed, Adrian and Anna, for talking and singing to us today.