Elgar, Vaughan Williams and the idea of the ‘English’ composer

After the death of Henry Purcell in 1695, it is a cliché of English musical history to say that there followed two centuries of silence before we arrive at the creative renaissance that put our music back on the world stage via the compositions of the two men featured in tonight’s concert. Like all clichés, it contains a grain of truth, though it does no favours to the likes of Cipriani Potter (friend and follower of Beethoven), or Sheffield’s own William Sterndale Bennett (friend and follower of Mendelssohn), or Sir Hubert Parry (friend and follower of Brahms). However, as the previous sentence suggests, one might look in vain for an entirely original voice in English music until the closing years of the nineteenth century.

Sir Edward Elgar (1857–1934) and Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958), in very different ways, each found a voice that recognisably evokes ‘Englishness’, just as, in the same era, one might hear a little Sibelius and say, ‘Ah – Finland!’ However, no sooner have we heard Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance March No 1* or Vaughan Williams’s *The Lark Ascending* and begun to believe that ‘Englishness’ is a thing of simple primary colours, than the picture becomes ambiguous. For both men, the idea of Englishness became demonstrably, to borrow an Elgar word, an enigma.

For Elgar, the ambiguities relate to the collision between a public persona as the embodiment of Edwardian fading grandeur (knighthood, Order of Merit, Master of the King’s Music) and a private identity that seemed at odds with being the musical voice of the establishment – provincial, Catholic, solitary, more interested in cycling or horse racing or scientific experiment, despite the honours heaped on him. And though it’s easy to hear in Elgar’s music a world that was swept away by the catastrophe of the first world war, that music retains its power to haunt us today because, underneath the ceremonial and the processional, it articulates just as strongly feelings of doubt and loss, and of Elgar, to use words particularly relevant this evening, the dreamer of dreams.

If Vaughan Williams was not initially the outsider in the same sense as Elgar, he too had a complex relationship with the establishment. Coming from a

family of ‘progressive’ liberal values, he was the grand-nephew of Charles Darwin, and early in his life he professed an atheism (later transmuted into what he called a ‘cheerful agnosticism’) that sits somewhat at odds with his role as editor of *The English Hymnal* and writer of some of the most rapturous Anglican music of the twentieth century. If Elgar’s ‘England of the mind’ is firmly rooted in Edwardian society and countryside, Vaughan Williams’s equivalent is moulded by the Renaissance choral music of Byrd and Tallis, by English folk song and by the hymns of the Anglican Church. Nevertheless, he refused a knighthood, turned down the chance to become Master of the King’s Music after Elgar’s death, and it is indicative that at the time of his own death he was President of the English Folk Song and Dance Society.

All of tonight’s music dates from the decades immediately before the start of the first world war. For both men the tragedy of the war years had a dramatic effect on their music. In that light, it’s easy to regard the world before 1914 as somehow ‘innocent’, but as we will see in tonight’s programme, that makes it no less complex. From the gentle sentimentality of salon music to the directness of the folk song idiom, from settings of Christian devotional poetry to more mystical celebrations of the creative artist, this selection of pieces by Elgar and Vaughan Williams reveals that early-twentieth-century English music had emerged from the shadows of the German giants of nineteenth-century music to find an increasingly confident voice of its own.

Vaughan Williams: *Linden Lea* (1901)

The first of Vaughan Williams’s works to appear in print, *Linden Lea* is a setting of words by the Dorset ‘dialect poet’ William Barnes, though in a slightly sanitised Standard English form. The song has become very well known, existing in dozens of arrangements – by 1925 Vaughan Williams could write about ‘such sins of my youth as *Linden Lea*, which becomes every year more horribly popular’. In an idiom somewhere between an English folk song and a hymn, it evokes the English pastoral idyll, particularly in its contrast, in the last of the three stanzas, with ‘dark-room’d towns’ where ‘other folk [may] make money faster’, but where there is no freedom to roam the idealised English landscape, whatever the season.

Elgar: Two Choral Songs, Op 73 – *Love's Tempest; Serenade* (1914)

The marked contrast between Vaughan Williams's setting of *Linden Lea* and these next two part-songs reveals much about the compositional practices of the two composers. Where Vaughan Williams uses folk-like phrase shapes and a simple 'artless' melody, Elgar's strategy is more clearly rooted in the German Romantic tradition of detailed word painting and chromatic harmony, as the opening bars of *Love's Tempest* clearly show. Elgar produced a sudden flurry of part-songs, songs for solo voice and verse anthems in 1914, and whilst these are evidently minor Elgar pieces, they are vivid dramatisations of poems by two Russian poets, Apollon Maykov and Nikolai Minsky, in translations by Rosa Newmarch. In *Love's Tempest* Elgar depicts the parallel stillness of an ocean before a storm and the narrator's heart when not thinking of his beloved. In both cases this tranquillity is shattered by, respectively, the storm at sea itself and subsequently the 'tumult wilder than the storm at sea' in the narrator's heart when thoughts of his beloved disturb his mind. The second song, *Serenade*, also has its inner turbulence, but although the soprano line evokes some rather expressionist horrors about 'real life', the other three parts invoke the transient consolations of a dream life, however fleeting these might be. The significance of the idea of dreams is explored in considerably more depth after the interval this evening.

Elgar: *Chanson de Matin* (1899); *Chanson de Nuit* (1897)

These two items, for which the adjective 'charming' might well have been invented, were originally scored for violin and piano; tonight's piano arrangements are by Desmond Ratcliffe. The *Chanson de Nuit*, originally called 'Evensong', is a rather sombre, reflective miniature. Elgar sent its companion piece to his publisher two years later with a note saying, 'I have suggested calling this "cheerful" piece *Chanson de Matin*.' According to Elgar's biographer, Michael Kennedy, it is 'a perfect little aubade, fresh as morning dew.' Tonight's performance sets them in reverse chronological order.

Vaughan Williams: *Five Mystical Songs* (1911)

Easter
I Got Me Flowers
Love Bade Me Welcome
The Call
Antiphon

George Herbert (1593–1633) wrote most of his devotional poetry in the final three years of his life, whilst Rector of Bemerton, near Salisbury, and the poems were gathered together after his death and published posthumously, under the title 'The Temple'. They are, in poem after poem, a constant attempt to make poetry function like prayer and devotion, whilst simultaneously calling into question the artifice that brings such poetry into existence. They are amongst the most passionately Christian poems in our language, and it is striking that Vaughan Williams's settings celebrate the force and rapture of their spiritual vision, despite his atheistic world view. They were written for the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester in 1911, and scored for baritone, with an accompanying chorus in the first three songs. The fourth song is for baritone alone, whilst the last, in tonight's performance, is for chorus but without soloist. In fact, Vaughan Williams sets four of Herbert's poems, the first two songs being settings of the former and latter halves of the poem 'Easter'.

In *Easter* itself the poet celebrates the Resurrection, and aspires to 'tune' both his heart and his lute to make music fit 'to celebrate this most high day'. *I Got Me Flowers* contemplates, in a way typical of metaphysical poetry of the period, the interplay between the rising of the sun and the rising of the Son on Easter morning, before ending with the emphatic observation that compared with many hundreds of sunrises, of the Resurrection we can only say 'There is but one, and that one ever'. The third song, *Love Bade Me Welcome*, is the most tender of the five, in which the narrator reflects on his unsuitability to be present at the 'feast' which Love has thrown in his honour. Love answers every objection, and insists on serving the guest: '"You must sit down", says Love, "and taste my meat." So I did sit and eat.' Vaughan Williams provides a beautiful touch here, as the chorus sing the wordless melody of the chant 'O

Sacrum Convivium', traditionally associated with Maundy Thursday services which commemorate Christ's serving his disciples at the Last Supper. In *The Call* the narrator embraces a vocation that is not just 'my Way, my Truth, my Life', but also, in successive verses, 'my Light, my Feast, my Strength' and 'my Joy, my Love, my Heart'. Vaughan Williams's setting mirrors the simple strophic pattern of the poem, ending in particularly radiant fashion. Finally, in *Antiphon*, the bells peal out to signal the universal celebration of 'My God and King'. Often sung separately as a church anthem, it provides a suitably ecstatic conclusion to Vaughan Williams's song cycle.

INTERVAL

Refreshments will be served at the back of the church

Elgar: *The Music Makers* (1912)

Elgar's *The Music Makers* is, to quote again from his biographer Michael Kennedy, a 'troubling and troubled work'. Written after the wild popularity that greeted the *Enigma Variations,* the first two *Pomp and Circumstance Marches* and the *Symphony No 1*, it was met by the same rather baffled bemusement that Elgar encountered after the first performances of the *Symphony No 2* and the symphonic study *Falstaff*, which come from the same period just before the first world war. Perhaps the key to making sense of this work is to understand the significance of the poem by Arthur O'Shaughnessy that Elgar sets in full in *The Music Makers*.

O'Shaughnessy was a minor Victorian poet, though perhaps 'minor' mainly because he died at the age of 36, but also partly because poetry wasn't his day job, as he worked in the British Museum as a herpetologist. (Wikipedia trivia fact: after his death he had four new species of lizard named after him.) His 'Ode', initially published in the collection *Music and Moonlight*, from 1874, is effectively the only poem for which he is now remembered, and in most cases in anthologised form it is cut from nine to just its first three verses. It is a complex work, as you can see from the full text, printed below, but in essence it might be summarised as celebrating the role of the poet or creative artist in ringing the changes in societies and civilisations, by seeing visions which the conventional hierarchies of those societies (the soldier, the king, the peasant)

then bring to pass, but which are subsumed in turn by the next wave of revelations. This 'cyclic' view of the past suggests that at any point humanity's history is in constant flux, where 'each age is a dream that is dying/ Or one that is coming to birth'. Whilst in some places the verse seems as though it might have been written by someone with the tin ear of a William McGonagall, there is no doubt that some lines from the poem, notably the opening, have made a deep impression on many subsequent writers, musicians and film-makers (and congratulations – though there is no prize – if you recognise the opening as uttered by Gene Wilder in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*).

A more important question than 'what does the poem mean?' might be 'what did the poem mean to Elgar?', given that it provoked in him a work which is more 'confessionally' autobiographical than anything else he produced. This is evident most obviously in the series of quotations from his other works that he wove into the texture of *The Music Makers*, but also in the clear identification that Elgar seems to have made between his own role and character and the 'music maker' whose identity the poem eulogises. It is often said that the self-referential quotations in this score make the piece Elgar's equivalent of Richard Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*, but the contrast is at least as instructive as the comparison: where Strauss is the 'hero' of his piece, doing battle with the critics who belittle his work, overcoming them in conflict, before retiring to a well-earned pastoral retreat with his doting helpmeet, Elgar's 'dreamer of dreams' is melancholic, socially isolated, the solitary bard.

The work lasts for around 40 minutes, and though it runs continuously, it can be seen to treat the nine verses of O'Shaughnessy's poem in clearly defined stages. The initial instrumental prelude sets the tone for what follows, with two themes that recur regularly later: the first is a three-note rising and falling figure, repeated in downward steps, and which seems somewhat melancholy; the second is more obviously one of Elgar's 'big tunes', a rising figure that repeats in upward steps. These melodies, pulling between sorrow and inspiration, are then developed, but embedded in the texture is the Original Theme from the *Enigma Variations*, and a comment by Elgar himself is pertinent here: the *Enigma* theme 'expressed when written my sense of the loneliness of the artist as described in the first six lines of the "Ode" and, to

me, it still embodies that sense'. This prepares the way for the entry of the Chorus:

> We are the music makers,
> And we are the dreamers of dreams,
> Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
> And sitting by desolate streams;
> World-losers and world-forsakers, *5*
> On whom the pale moon gleams:
> Yet we are the movers and shakers
> Of the world for ever, it seems.

The first stanza leaves us in no doubt that the 'we' of the poem are creative artists, but the doomed romantic imagery (lonely, desolate, pale, forsaken) gives the verse that sepia tone of mid-Victorian sentiment. Elgar, however, identifies strongly with its depiction, quoting from *The Dream of Gerontius* at 'dreamers of dreams', from *Sea Pictures* at 'lone sea breakers', and the *Enigma* theme again, twice, both at 'desolate streams' and at 'for ever, it seems'. Though there is agitation at 'movers and shakers', the mood in general is hushed, resigned.

> With wonderful deathless ditties
> We build up the world's great cities, *10*
> And out of a fabulous story
> We fashion an empire's glory:
> One man with a dream, at pleasure,
> Shall go forth and conquer a crown;
> And three with a new song's measure *15*
> Can trample a kingdom down.

The sudden shift at the start of the second stanza into something animated and martial suggests the artist's role in 'fashion[ing] an empire's glory', as though it is a tale the powerful tell themselves to legitimise their dreams of conquest. Though Elgar's work is not known for its irony, he weaves in parodic versions of both *Rule, Britannia!* and *La Marseillaise* at this point. The rather cryptic reference in lines 15–16 of the poem has been seen as alluding to O'Shaughnessy's Irish nationalism, though it's not clear what Elgar's view of

this might have been. Nevertheless, the music here undergoes a disintegrating slide as line 16 is repeated.

We, in the ages lying
In the buried past of the earth,
Built Nineveh with our sighing,
And Babel itself in our mirth; *20*
And o’erthrew them with prophesying
To the old of the new world’s worth;
For each age is a dream that is dying,
Or one that is coming to birth.

This next stanza takes the long view, noting the role of the ‘music makers’ in the rise and fall of Nineveh and Babel, but the last four lines of the stanza get Elgar’s best ‘maestoso’ treatment on ‘o’erthrew them with prophesying’, and the sense that something apocalyptic is presaged in ‘one that is coming to birth’. (There are some uncomfortable pre-echoes here of Yeats’ ‘The Second Coming’, but it may be best to leave these unexplored.)

[We are the music makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams]

At this point Elgar repeats the opening lines of the Chorus, linking it to the ‘inspiration’ theme from the instrumental prelude. The dream continues:

A breath of our inspiration *25*
Is the life of each generation;
A wondrous thing of our dreaming
Unearthly, impossible seeming—
The soldier, the king, and the peasant
Are working together in one, *30*
Till our dream shall become their present,
And their work in the world be done.

Lines 25–32 of the poem are set to shifting moods in Elgar’s treatment, hushed for the ‘breath of our inspiration’, but becoming ever more agitated as ‘the soldier, the king and the peasant’ bring the dream to pass, and then

subdued again as that cycle of history winds to its close as ‘their work in the world [is] done’.

> They had no vision amazing
> Of the goodly house they are raising;
> They had no divine foreshowing *35*
> Of the land to which they are going:
> But on one man’s soul it hath broken,
> A light that doth not depart;
> And his look, or a word he hath spoken,
> Wrought flame in another man’s heart.

The soloist enters at line 33, and at this point something very curious happens as this stanza unfolds. At the line ‘But on one man’s soul it hath broken’, the soloist quotes the ‘Nimrod’ theme from the *Enigma Variations*, an idea taken up in turn by the chorus. It would seem that Elgar associated these lines very specifically with his friend AJ Jaeger (the ‘Nimrod’ of the *Enigma*), who died in 1909, and this seems very like an elegiac tribute to a wise friend. Elgar himself wrote: ‘I do not mean to convey that his was the only word or look that “wrought flame in another man’s heart”, but I do convey that amongst all the inept writing and wrangling about music his voice was clear, ennobling, sober and sane.’ Such an intensely personal reading of O’Shaughnessy’s verse is, by any standards, an odd thing, but what Elgar makes of it musically is remarkable. There is in addition a quotation from the *Symphony No 2* at ‘And his look, or a word he hath spoken’ to underscore the link between Jaeger and Elgar’s own creative inspiration.

> And therefore to-day is thrilling
> With a past day’s late fulfilling;
> And the multitudes are enlisted
> In the faith that their fathers resisted,
> And, scorning the dream of to-morrow, *45*
> Are bringing to pass, as they may,
> In the world, for its joy or its sorrow,
> The dream that was scorned yesterday.

Lines 40–48 are given extremely agitated treatment by Elgar, a wash of overlapping lines that seem to enact the turmoil of contemporary change in Elgar's society. Is this Elgar envisaging mass revolution? Perhaps, but it's not clear that it is either a good or a bad thing – the resignation at 'for its joy or its sorrow' is (that Elgar word again) enigmatic. In the midst of this section Elgar twice inserts the 'we are the music makers' material, to keep the creative artists in the forefront of the 'thrilling' changes that are afoot.

But we, with our dreaming and singing,
Ceaseless and sorrowless we! *50*
The glory about us clinging
Of the glorious futures we see,
Our souls with high music ringing:
O men! it must ever be
That we dwell, in our dreaming and singing, *55*
A little apart from ye.

If the previous stanza looked outward to great sweeping events, then lines 49–56 return us to Elgar the introverted artist, amongst the music makers who dwell 'A little apart from ye'. For the most part, the music of this verse is radiant. The Original Theme from the *Enigma Variations* appears again here twice, confirming the comment that Elgar made about it earlier, along with a fragment from the slow movement of the Violin Concerto.

For we are afar with the dawning
And the suns that are not yet high,
And out of the infinite morning
Intrepid you hear us cry— *60*
How, spite of your human scorning,
Once more God's future draws nigh,
And already goes forth the warning
That ye of the past must die.

The link with the 'music makers' is apparent in the way that theme is employed for 'we are afar with the dawning', and here again Elgar turns autobiographical, quoting the noble march-like theme from his *Symphony No 1* at 'out of the infinite morning/ Intrepid you hear us cry'. The final line of the

stanza is hushed. There is something seemingly final about the treatment of ‘ye of the past must die.’

> Great hail! we cry to the comers *65*
> From the dazzling unknown shore;
> Bring us hither your sun and your summers;
> And renew our world as of yore;
> You shall teach us your song’s new numbers,
> And things that we dreamed not before: *70*
> Yea, in spite of a dreamer who slumbers,
> And a singer who sings no more.

The last stanza begins with the soloist, greeting the potential dreamers of the future, whose songs will in their turn make the present’s music makers a thing of the past. The ending is, as one might expect by this stage, ambivalent. There is something luminous to suit the ‘sun and … summers’ imagery and the idea of constant renewal, but pathos too in the final two lines of the poem – for Elgar, as for O’Shaughnessy before him, his time will come and inevitably go, swallowed up in the vast rolling round of universal change. Elgar’s last self-quotation at this point, the poignant utterance that accompanies Gerontius’s death in *The Dream of Gerontius* at the ‘singer who sings no more’, is especially moving. We are left with the hollowed-out haunted voices of the chorus, intoning for one final time, ‘We are the music makers, and we are the dreamers of dreams.’

Programme Notes by Phil Parker
June 2017

Tim Peters has recently graduated from Sheffield University with a BMus and has been appointed as Escafeld Chorale's Associate Soloist for 2017–18. He is a tenor Choral Scholar at Sheffield Cathedral and regularly performs in choirs in and around Sheffield, Manchester, Nottingham, Leeds, York, Guildford and London. Since commencing his undergraduate studies at the university, Tim has regularly performed as a soloist with choirs in the city, most recently with Sheffield Bach Choir (Handel's *Messiah*), Sheffield Teachers Choir (*Olivet to Calvary* and *The Crucifixion*), the Abbeydale Singers (*Carmina Burana*) and Bingham Choral Society (Mozart's *Vespers* and Pergolesi's *Magnificat*), in addition to numerous performances as a recitalist this year. Before university, Tim was the Tenor 1 section leader for the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain and sang with the National Youth Chamber Choir. Performing with these choirs gave him the opportunity to sing in prestigious venues across the UK. Further engagements with these ensembles included several Aldeburgh and live televised BBC Proms performances and several professional recordings. Outside of singing, Tim conducts several choirs in Sheffield. He also composes and has had three commissions this year from Sheffield Cathedral and the University's Chamber Choir. Other interests include arranging, jazz piano performance, trombone performance and sampling real ale.

We are grateful to the **Friends of Escafeld Chorale** (Harry Armitage, Peter Bower, John Eckford, Shirley Ellins, Jenny and Nick Etherington Dunn, Eve Fawcett, Carol Fleming, Simon Kingsley, Arnold Lawson, Pam and Terry Popple, Geoff Wood and two anonymous Friends) for supporting our work this season.