

IN YEARS DEFACED

It all started at a Finzi Trust meeting. We were all 'brainstorming' madly—as one does—considering all sorts of notions of what we might try to put into the Finzi Centenary Year that would be a little out of the ordinary. Already, exciting projects were afoot, most notably the revival of Gerald's early Violin Concerto, in which publishers and recording companies were promptly showing an eager, not to say beady-eyed, interest. Naturally, we were looking to promote neglected work as well as old favourites. It was Robert Gower who mentioned Gerald's arrangement for small orchestra of 'When I set out for Lyonesse'. This had originally been made at the behest of the tenor Stuart Wilson, who had sung it at a Lemare concert in 1936 (considerately transposed up to G minor). This was the programme that had launched the Milton Sonnets and Farewell to Arms, dark-hued and reflective respectively. It occurred to me that maybe the Hardy setting—quite bracing for Gerald—had been put in as an encore? Whatever the pretext, it was a one-off: easy to get overlooked.

Anyway, what to do with it now? If it were to be effectively revived, it would need companions; and so the idea of an orchestral set of Finzi songs came into being. As I recall, the concept was thrashed about—con brio—in the course of that one afternoon. We rejected quite brusquely the proposal of orchestrating Earth and Air and Rain in its entirety: too long, MUCH too long—we weren't in the business of rewriting Das Lied van der Erde! And the suggestion that one composer only should undertake the task was also quashed: too much responsibility. Much more interesting, surely, to invite a whole gang of composers to add their own individual mark to the music; and so we had a lot of fun considering whom we would want to join in.

Already two composers, Christian Alexander and myself, were 'on site' and available; we needed another three or four to make up a reasonable quorum. Michael Berkeley seemed an obvious choice: he was a Vice President of the Friends and obviously devoted to English music. Then there was Anthony Payne: anybody who could do such an inspired job on the Elgar Third Symphony was clearly worth pursuing. Judith Weir, out of the blue it appeared, had written an extraordinarily perceptive and enthusiastic review of Stephen Banfield's biography: I had never imagined that Finzi would be quite her bag. So in the light of that we approached her too (a bit gingerly). Finally, Colin Matthews—the spouse of Belinda, who had seen the Banfield book so smoothly through the corridors of Faber—seemed a biddable candidate: a remarkable composer with a proven mastery of the art of orchestration, as anybody who knows his work on Britten and Mahler Ten can testify.

We failed to entice Michael Berkeley—he was in the travails of another opera—but all the others responded with enthusiasm, especially when it appeared likely that the whole set might be recorded, as well as feature quite prominently in one of the centenary concerts! There still remained the problem of finding a suitable selection of songs from which to choose. Some songs of Gerald's cry out for orchestral treatment: when Howard Ferguson was sounded out about the project (yes, we'd thought of Howard, too), although he was curiously negative with regard to his own possible contribution, he was quick to single out 'Channel firing' as one that might be enhanced by the orchestra. But then that colossal Mussorgskian song would require a big orchestra and a baritone, and we were rather tied to a chamber orchestra (double wind, two horns, and strings) and a tenor. And the restriction to the tenor voice proved to be the most irksome, for most of Gerald's songs for voice and piano are for the lower voice. The early tenor cycle, A Young Man's Exhortation, yielded nothing: too

pianistically contrapuntal to lend itself to orchestral expansion. We trawled backwards and forwards, not ruling out transposition, and in the end distributed around half a dozen songs which sort of held together, not only in mood but in tonality also.

I'd already put in a bid for the Flecker setting, 'To a poet', but I knew there were others that I could be quite comfortable with. Christian had brought off a scoop when he found a hitherto unpublished, and unique, setting of Edward Thomas's 'Tall nettles': an early fragment, written in open score, unmistakably suggesting orchestral colouring. Anthony Payne, who was already thoroughly familiar with the ground, blithely disdained the proffered list and volunteered 'Proud songsters' (transposed up a minor third), the concluding song of Earth and Air and Rain. This was obviously close to home for him: he is a confessed Hardy buff, and had himself made a setting of that poem. Judith and Colin were evidently less familiar and needed a bit of a nudge in the right direction: in Judith's case, the posthumously published 'At a lunar eclipse', and in Colin's, 'To a poet', which he quietly snatched from beneath my nose. That left me with 'In years defaced'—a gift!—which presented itself as an appropriate title for the set.

I'd decided to 'blow up' Gerald's original orchestra to allow for more weight as well as more variety of approach. A couple of trumpets were added as 'optional extras', together with timpani, percussion and harp. In the event, none of us was extravagant, preferring to fall in with the composer's own fastidiousness: the curious touches—Tony's use of the tambourine for the chattering finches, Christian's crotales glinting in the sunlight—all the more effective for their understatement.

The recording session could have been hairy: six items—none of them familiar to the City of London Sinfonia—had to be got into the can in six hours. But it could not have run more smoothly: Chandos's producer, Brian Couzens, presided, entirely benign; and Richard Hickox, committed, focussed, often ebullient, kept things on the boil, using every minute constructively. The singer, John Mark Ainsley, standing apart from the rest, seemed inexhaustible in stamina and good humour, constantly refreshing the inflexion of his interpretation. Everybody was in a good mood.

The music did the trick. It sounded so well: Gerald's voice unmistakable, of course, against a background which had been affirmed and elucidated and enriched with such remarkable insight and imagination by one and all. Judith brought an almost Holstian quality to the eclipse, with her luminous use of winds and harp and austere processional counterpoint. Then Colin's mastery of nuance, the subtle transmuted instrumental colouring lent devastating poignancy to 'To a poet'. The shifting lights in the Edward Thomas setting, that owe so much to Vaughan Williams's Pastoral Symphony, are beautifully brought out in Christian's version. And Anthony Payne's 'Proud songsters', the inevitable envoi, rings with vitality, that tugging energy which is almost the most heartbreaking thing of all.

The whole occasion was oddly moving: Gerald was absent, but then, so were so many others. Of the little squad of living composers that had been assembled to 'shake him by the hand', only Tony, with his wife Jane Manning, and I were able to be present.

However there was a great sense of satisfaction at the end: these six orchestral songs make a rich bag. As Tony said, 'Why can't we do more?'

(Published in Finzi Friends Newsletter, 2007)

