

GERALD FINZI (1901-1956)

BACKGROUND

AUDIO: *Prelude for Strings* (1925) – act. 25

Entitled *Intrada*, originally intended as part of a Chamber Symphony; then, along with the big orchestral elegy – *The Fall of the Leaf* - as part of a ‘seasonal’ triptych: *The Bud, the Blossom and the Berry*.

In its modest way the piece tells one a good deal about Finzi:

His manner of working: first drafted in 1925; revised in 1935 and again in 1945; but only published after his death. Like so many of his ideas, it was subject to frequent transformation: not only with regard to medium and material, but also context. He tended to ‘hoard’ bits and pieces, frequently tinkering with them, until he found the right frame-work or setting.

eg. *Dies Natalis* (Traherne) – possibly his best known work, of a perfect compactness and unity, was composed piece-meal: the first couple of numbers and the last in 1926, the central two in 1938-39.

This suggests that he preferred to work in miniature forms, which he could then assemble or anthologize later. It might also suggest creative/expressive diffidence; technical caution; self-criticism; the search for perfection. But as usual one might be wrong in inferring all these things. Certainly, when he attempted a more grandiose attitude, more expansive forms and elaborate orchestral media, his command is sometimes less sure. Like VW and Fauré, he frequently had recourse to friends for counsel and even assistance.

The *Prelude* can also tell one a good deal about Gerald Finzi’s musical character and temperament.

Reflective; elegiac; sober – surprisingly over-shadowed for a spring-time piece: as though touched already with portents of Autumn. Time passing; the transience of things – is an underlying theme, a kind of Ground, that runs through his life’s work: a preoccupation which shows his kinship with the great Metaphysical poets of the 17th century – Drummond of Hawthornden; Crashaw; Henry Vaughan – as well as with the profound pessimism and sometimes bitter irony of Thomas Hardy.

Lines from Psalm 90 are inscribed in the second of his Hardy song-cycles – *A Young Man’s Exhortation* (1929): *Mane floreat, et transeat* – ‘in the morning it flourisheth and groweth up’; *Verspere decidat, induret, et arescat* – ‘in the evening, it is cut down and withereth’.

Although such a gloomy inclination might seem in some young people an affectation, in Finzi’s case – as in Mahler’s – the *idée fixe* was pressed upon him by circumstances.

Born in 1901, the son of a Jewish shipbroker, he was educated privately, and began his music studies with a young composer and organist, Ernest Farrar, at the age of 13. These lessons ceased when Farrar joined up in 1916; and he continued his studies – along fairly orthodox lines – with Sir Edward Bairstow at York Minster.

Finzi's youth and childhood had already been overshadowed by loss: his father had died when he was eight, and three elder brothers had also died before their time. But Farrar's death in the trenches in 1918 must have hurt him even more keenly. Like Butterworth's, his had been a bright talent extinguished needlessly. But Finzi had also lost a friend who had given him the kind of musical stimulus he lacked at home. These events confirmed in him a tendency to introspection – (rather than driving him to escapism, which might have been the alternative) – and led him more deeply into the companionship of the poets, who had always been his true tutors. Thus two important aspects and needs of his musical personality were established before he had yet begun to compose.

Ethically too, much was determined during these critical years of late adolescence: his pacifism – which was not of the ostrich kind; his dedication to music which he saw as a proof of civilisation, seemingly frail but indestructible; and his championship of all sorts of individuals and causes which he considered neglected or abused. He thought and expressed himself passionately on these things, but never in his music. (With the exception, maybe, of *Farewell to Arms*). In fact, it was in acting upon these beliefs, putting himself in their service, that he was taken out of himself. He was never an idealist, let alone a crank: practical, orderly, and with a streak of obduracy, he contrived to ensure that all these scattered altruistic enterprises were effective.

For example: Ivor Gurney; Newbury String Players (1939); editorial work: *Musica Britannica* – John Stanley, Boyce, Capel Bond, Mudge, Parry; refugees; apples; the bookroom.

All these activities sprang from a need to protect – and to help flourish - things that might otherwise be overlooked. The country-house which he built for himself after his marriage high up in the hills of Hampshire was not just a retreat in which he could work with newly won confidence: it provided him with a setting in which he could express himself also through collecting, preserving, harvesting. This country-life – an odd assumption for a composer, especially for one who had emerged from an urban, Jewish childhood background – recalls the enthusiasms – horticultural, herbal, apicultural – of his beloved 17th century poets: people like Marvell:

What wondrous life is this I lead!
Ripe apples drop about my head;
The luscious clusters of the vine
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
The nectarine, and curious peach,
Into my hands themselves do reach;
Stumbling on melons as I pass,
Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass.

MUSICAL STYLE

Given his ‘organ-loft’ training, and his subsequent contrapuntal studies with R.O. Morris (1925), it’s hardly surprising that he should have cultivated a musical style in which craft takes precedence over fancy. “For me, at any rate, the essence of art is order, completion and fulfilment. Something is created out of nothing, order out of chaos;...”. So, like many other young men emerging from the chaos of the first world war, he felt naturally in sympathy with the *rappel à l’ordre* of 20th century classicism. A number of English composers of the his generation – for instance, Rubbra and Tippett – resorted to the music of the past, both for technical models and aesthetically, as a kind of dream. In this respect they were simply following the lead of their elders, Vaughan Williams, Holst, and Peter Warlock. But although, with Finzi, some of them could be described as a group, satellites around the dominant figure of Vaughan Williams, it would be wrong to lump them together as a ‘school’. Each was gifted with a particular individuality and drawn to a particular synthesis of styles.

AUDIO: *Introit for Violin and small Orchestra* (1925; revised 1935 and 1942). Only surviving movement of complete Violin Concerto first performed in 1928 under Vaughan Williams.

Obviously ‘English’ in a generalized sort of way, this music is never-the-less indisputably Finzi’s. There is some similarity to Rubbra’s instrumental style in the contrapuntal writing; but it’s gentler, less ‘driven’, and less turgid in texture. The modal, melismatic writing – so commonplace in English music of the period – is quite different from the free, drifting melismatic style of Vaughan Williams or Herbert Howells: its rhythm is more neatly articulated, in a way that recalls not only Bach but the keyboard music of the English Renaissance. Finzi’s emotional reserve is conveyed within a modest dynamic range and in an austere harmonic idiom, devoid of the chromatic spice that Howells and others liked to inject into their writing.

AUDIO: *Eclogue for Piano and String Orchestra* (1920’s, twice revised 1940’s). Intended as a movement of a concerto.

Music that taps the past – especially that written in the 20’s – often tends to be quaint – ‘Stockbroker’s Tudor’ – or satirical, in a modish Parisian fashion. Finzi shunned satire: his humour was of a quite different order; and he was too brusque and unsentimental to be taken in by the quaint. His classicism is akin to Fauré’s: the purely musical values of balance, grace, linear tension and steady harmonic movement – a good bass – are more essential than the cunning artifice of canon and the use of mordents. Like Fauré’s late music – which Finzi much admired – this disciplined lyrical writing doesn’t sound dated, like so much ‘neo-classical’ music.

Here is another example of Finzi’s lucid contrapuntal style – his ‘sweet archaic song’: the Aria from *Farewell to Arms* (1920’s). Like the final Aria of *Dies Natalis*, this music is obviously modelled on Bach, the chorale-preludes, or possibly the fourth movement of *Wachet Auf*; but the idiom is transmuted into something absolutely personal, for all its monotony. (Diana McVeagh has pointed out that there is not one accidental in the entire piece).

His golden locks time hath to silver turned;
O time too swift, o swiftness never ceasing.
His youth 'gainst time and age hath ever spurned,
But spurned in vain; Youth waneth by increasing:
Beauty, strength, youth, are flowers but fading seen;
Duty, faith, love, are roots and ever green.

George Peele

AUDIO: *Farewell to Arms*: Aria

This amiable music might leave a rather bland impression if it were not heard in the context of a much broader range of expression. From the start Finzi had at his disposal a reservoir of dissonance which would answer to his needs in conveying darker moods, as well as qualifying, and thereby intensifying, his lyrical moments.

EXAMPLES:

Cello Concerto: 1st Movt.

Prelude: middle section. 'English' dissonance: the use of false-relation on 6th and 7th degrees of minor scale, often found in Tudor composers.

a) *Earth Air and Rain*: 'Waiting both'

b) *A Young Man's Exhortation*: 'The Comet at Yelham'

A more astringent degree of dissonance, again the result of the conflict of independent lines. The bitonality at the start of b) is not unusual in English music of the 20's. cf. Holst's *Terzetto*, and the vocal canons in several keys; even more VW's *Flos Campi* (1925). The enrichment of triadic writing by the integration of foreign elements is also Holstian (eg. *Mercury*, etc. But cf. also Ravel's *Piano Trio* and other works). Other examples of this practice: *Intimations* – 'Thou Child of Joy'; *I said to Love*: 'Thou art not young'; 'Man's race shall perish'; *Ode on the rejection of St. Cecilia*. Also *Milton Sonnets*.

I said to Love: 'At Middle-Field Gate in February'

Finzi uses harmony not so much with a colouristic, suggestive end in view, but to enhance emotional expression. (Only rare instances of 'exotic' harmony). Here the mournfulness of the winter scene is conveyed in a texture and pulse that recalls not only Holst's *Saturn* but Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige*.

For Finzi, musical texture – and indeed the processes of musical thinking – radiated from spontaneous lyrical impulses. His training had taught him how to amplify the 'found' melody through imitation, extension, modification, interior commentary; and this old-fashioned craft, though sometimes used in a routine sequential manner, can engineer stupendous effects of gathering excitement, effusiveness, lingering echoes. Especially in choral media of course, though polyphonic habits are reflected in his instrumental writing as well, as we have seen.

EXAMPLES:

Intimations – ‘There was a time’

Ode to St. Cecilia – ‘Wherefore we bid you’

But lyricism needs also to flourish uncurbed by contrapuntal obligations. Either in eloquent recitative, where Finzi’s resourceful harmonic idiom is potent enough to be expressed in the simplest chordal texture; or where melody takes flight and a more transparent, buoyant texture is required. Some of Finzi’s freshest, most ‘Wordsworthian’ moments involve a free cantilena floating over a murmuring, slow measured-tremolo: sunny, mysterious, sometimes ominous.

EXAMPLES:

Clarinet Concerto: 1st Movement

Intimations: ‘Hence in a calm season’; ‘And hear the mighty waters’

MUSICAL OUTPUT

We have heard examples of both instrumental and vocal music, and it’s time to get some perspective on Finzi’s musical output. Most people would assume – correctly – that he was pre-eminently a vocal composer, and tend to ignore his instrumental work. Certainly there is less of it, and with the exception of the *Clarinet Concerto* which has a popular place in the repertoire it’s less frequently performed.

The *Prelude* we heard at the start is just one of several short pieces – ‘remains’ – that he left us. The larger and more ambitious projects – the *Nocturne*, *New Year’s Music* and the *Elegy*, *Fall of the Leaf*, both originally drafted in the 20’s and revised in the 40’s – are not entirely satisfactory: through-composed in a rather sprawling fashion, without the control of Holst’s *Egdon Heath* or Elgar’s *Falstaff*. For all the poignancy and intermittent splendour of some of the music, one senses embarrassment in tying the bits together (cf. *Intimations*), and coping with the cumbersome orchestra. A much more natural medium for Finzi would involve the individual voice of a solo instrument. The *Introit for Violin and small Orchestra*, the *Eclogue* for piano and strings have already indicated the premises he would follow in writing a fully fledged concerto for a cantabile instrument.

AUDIO: *Clarinet Concerto: Rondo* (1948-49)

Finzi’s first efforts in composition were for unaccompanied voices: the *Ten Children’s Songs* for women’s voices to voices by Christina Rossetti. They are highly accomplished for a young man of 20, and show cunning in overcoming the limitations of the medium. Finzi’s masters in the writing for voices were Parry – in his more grandiose moments: the marshalling of forces; and Stanford – in his use of textural and harmonic colour, warm or cool (eg. *Bluebird*). All Finzi’s choral music is couched, rather too comfortably, in this traditional idiom, in which euphony and beauty of sound are paramount. What is missing – in spite of its rhythmic vigour – is sinew: if only he had paid more attention to Purcell! It’s not only in his choice of poet – Edmund Blunden, Robert Bridges – that he could be himself dubbed a ‘Georgian’

composer – without disparagement; the sweep and grace of much of his choral music is redolent of pre-war ease and confidence: Elgarian, even ‘Edwardian’.

AUDIO: *Ode to St. Cecilia*

In dealing with the solo voice – whether accompanied by piano or instrumental ensemble or orchestra – Finzi generally brought a more austere sensibility to bear. His Op. 2, *By Footpath and Style* for baritone and string quartet is the first of his Thomas Hardy sets – a real song-cycle – in which already, in response to Hardy’s uncomfortable view of the world, also the awkward diction of his verse, Finzi uncovered for the first time his personal accent. Of course there are echoes of Vaughan Williams and Butterworth: their ‘folkish’ treatment of A.E. Houseman’s sad rustics (*Wenlock Edge; A Shropshire Lad*). But the leaner texture of string quartet, the scrupulousness of diction, the objectivity, sometimes sardonic, of characterisation, enabled Finzi to create a world: quite distinct from the picturesque ‘blue remembered hills’: a much bleaker world that he was to make peculiarly his own.

Altogether Finzi produced 50 settings from Thomas Hardy’s poems – a commitment which suggests the most intimate self-identification with the poet. Usually the songs are bound in sets of ten, without any narrative, cyclic organisation, but satisfactorily grouped, like Schumann’s *Liederkreis*. They represent the whole span of Finzi’s creative life, from the age of 20 to within a few months of his death at 55; and in reviewing them one can see that his language – always susceptible to detail, idiosyncrasy; and like Janacek’s, especially sensitive to vocal gesture, pacing – his language never underwent any conspicuous change: never really needed to. Finzi is equal to all Hardy’s contradictory moods: they run the gamut from the simplest lyric – gentle, winsome, almost Quilter-esque: *Lizbie Browne, Amabel*; or bracing, in a bluff Parry sort of way: *Rollicum-Rorum, Budmouth Dears*; to the apocalyptic: *Channel Firing*; and the Lear-like frenzy of *I said to Love*. Futile to attempt a criticism in a few words of what amounts to a colossal and lasting achievement.

AUDIO: *Till Earth Outwears*: ‘In Years Defaced’

Besides the more conventional medium of voice and piano, Finzi turned to other kinds of accompaniment. I’ve already mentioned the use of string quartet in *Footstep and Stile*, and we’ve heard the *Aria from Farewell to Arms* for voice and small orchestra; there are the two *Milton Sonnets*, also using a small orchestra; and the Shakespeare songs from *Love’s Labours Lost* and *Let us Garlands Bring* (a string arrangement of the original piano version). Most distinguished of all – a perfect masterpiece and unique – is the *Cantata* for high voice and strings, to words by the 17th century mystical poet Thomas Traherne, *Dies Natalis*.

The first miracle was that Finzi should have lit upon the work of this obscure poet. (It’s like Debussy’s accidental encounter with Maeterlinck’s *Pelleas*: they were made for each other). At the age of 25, Finzi’s spirit and his musical language were in absolute accord with the spirit and language of this poetry: its wonder and wisdom and ecstasy. In one of his *Crees Lectures* on ‘The Composer’s Use of Words’, Finzi quoted with approval Ravel, who said that his aim was not to add anything to a poem, but merely to interpret it: “I think and feel in music, and I should like to think the same things as the poet does”.

The Rhapsody – set in Recitativo Stromentato – is a consummate example of Finzi’s art. It’s a setting of prose passages from *The Centuries of Meditation*. The achievement lies in the organisation of the music into clear formal periods; the maintaining of continuity and flow, deftly punctuated; the motival unity in the use of rising and falling step-movement; and penetrating all this, and never obscured or usurped in eloquence, the recitative. Note how again and again a vocal phrase or gesture triggers off a chain of expressive echoes in the strings, as though compensating for those melismas which Finzi expunges so ruthlessly from his declamation. There is a sort of shyness as well as ardour in this music which perfectly matches Traherne’s apprehension of innocence: primal grace.

AUDIO: *Dies Natalis* – ‘The Rhapsody’

Two years after composing that music, at the age of 27, Finzi contracted TB. He was obliged to retire from the scene and spend several months in a nursing home.

How soon hat Time, the subtle thief of youth,
Stolen on his wing my three-and-twentieth year!
My hasting days fly on with full career,
But my late spring no bud or blossom shew’th.

Thus begins one of the Milton Sonnets that he chose to set, unflinchingly, that same year, 1928. The other – Milton’s response to his encroaching blindness – ‘When I consider how my light is spent,/Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide’ – presages inescapably the second great crisis that came upon him in his full maturity.

I’m going to read in full what must seem to be Gerald Finzi’s Testament: first drawn up in the dark days of the war when it seemed that everything would fold up, and that for a Jew especially there would not be much hope; and then supplemented by an afterword ten years later. He calls it *Absalom’s Place*.

‘It was Thomas Hardy who wrote – “Why do I go on doing these things?” – and, indeed, if appreciation were a measure of merit and cause for self-esteem, it would long ago have been time for me to shut up shop, class myself as a failure, and turn to something of what the world is pleased to call a more ‘useful’ nature.

‘Yet some curious force compels us to preserve and project into the future the essence of our individuality, and, in doing so, to project something of our age and civilization. The artist is like the coral insect, building his reef out of the transitory world around him and making a solid structure to last long after his own fragile and uncertain life. It is one of the many proud points of his occupation that, great or small, there is, ultimately, little else but his work through which his country and his civilization may be known and judged by posterity; (As to stature, it is of no matter. The coral reef, like the mountain peaks, has its ups and downs. ‘If he cannot bring a Cedar, let him bring a Shrubbe’). (Francis Quarles)

‘It was, then, in no mood of vanity that Henry Vaughan wrote –

Ad Posterios

Diminuat ne sera dies praesentis honorem,
Quis, qualisque; fui, percipe Posteritas.

(Englished by Blunden thus:

To After Ages

Time, soon forgets; and yet I would not have
The present wholly mouldering in the grave.
Hear the, posterity).

‘Nor was Absalom guilty of mere self-aggrandisement when we read in the second book of Samuel:

‘Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and reared up for himself a pillar, which is in the King’s dale: For he said, I have no son to keep my name in remembrance: And he called the pillar after his own name, and it is called unto this day, Absalom’s place’.

‘And what of the main-spring of this curious force, this strange necessity?

‘There is no need here to go into the labyrinths of esthetics and to discuss whether art is based on the need for communication or the need for organized expression. For me, at any rate, the essence of art is order, completion and fulfilment. Something is created out of nothing, order out of chaos; and as we succeed in shaping our intractable material into coherence and form, a relief comes to the mind (akin to the relief experienced at the remembrance of some forgotten thing) as a new accretion is added to that projection of oneself which, in metaphor, has been called ‘Absalom’s place’ or a coral reef or a ‘ceder or shrubbe’.

‘It must be clear, particularly in the case of a slow worker, that only a long life can see the rounding-off and completion of this projection. Consequently, those few works of mine fit for publication can only be regarded as a fragment of a building. The foundations have (perhaps) been laid, odd bricks are lying about, though comparatively little of the end which is envisaged is to be seen. Long may Absalom’s pillar grow, but in the even of my death I am anxious for as much as is finished and fit for publication to be issued, preferably in as uniform an edition as possible. It would be unwise to issue definite instructions; likely as not, with constantly changing conditions, they would soon be out of date and unpractical. I should like the whole question of revised publications, new publications and withdrawals to be dealt with systematically and I suggest that the advice of Howard Ferguson should be asked. Not only does he know my systematized marks of expression, etc. but his practical advice has always been of the greatest help. That, together with my dear Wife’s judgement, should be sufficient’.

Gerald Finzi
July 1941

‘Since the preceding pages were written, ten years ago, a good deal more work has been written. Performances, publication and some kindly and generous notice, have all taken place, which I hope my development has justified.

‘But a serious, and possibly fatal, illness has now been confirmed by the Doctors. At 49 I feel I have hardly begun my work.

My thread is cut, and yet it is not spun;
And now I live, and now my life is done.

As usually happens, it is likely that new ideas, new fashions and the pressing forward of new generations, will soon obliterate my small contribution. Yet I like to think that in each generation may be found a few responsive minds, and for them I should still like the work to be available. To shake hands with a good friend over the centuries is a pleasant thing, and the affection which an individual may retain after his departure is perhaps the only which guarantees an ultimate life to his works’.

Gerald Finzi
June 1951

In the few years that were left him, till his death in 1956, Finzi worked with an extraordinary energy – all the more remarkable in the face of the debilitating nature of his disease. He completed *Intimations of Immortality*, the Christmas scene *In Terra Pax*, the *Grand Fantasia and Toccata* for piano and orchestra, the *Cello Concerto*; and he was planning a symphony at the end. And of course there were always songs. These were the years in which he delivered his editions of old English music for Musica Britannica.

There is a change of emphasis: urgency and despair drive him occasionally to a pitch of rhetoric, a forcibleness, that is unprecedented in his earlier music. The first movement of his *Cello Concerto* is the most sustained example of this, and gives one a glimpse of the kinds of conflict that might have permeated the *Symphony*. But he wouldn’t have left it there: “order out of chaos, completion, and fulfilment” would be outcome and the core, we surmise.

Finzi’s first response to the definitive news that his days were numbered, was not on a note of protest, nor even Mahlerian resignation; but music of such timeless serenity that it seems untouched by the idea of mortality: the *Andante quieto* which became the centre-piece of his *Cello Concerto*. Equally untroubled, in the last words of his ‘Testament’ he put his trust in the affection which his work would afford him after his departure. The words are actually a paraphrase of Flecker’s address ‘To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence’, from which Finzi took one of his most magical songs.

I who am dead a thousand years,
And wrote this sweet archaic song,
Send you my words for messengers
The way I shall not pass along.

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O friend unseen, unborn, unknown,
Student of our sweet English tongue,
Read out my words at night, alone:
I was a poet, I was young.

Since I can never see your face,
And never shake you by the hand,
I send my soul through time and space
To greet you. You will understand.

AUDIO: *Cello Concerto* - Andante quieto

JEREMY DALE ROBERTS (198?)