

HOWARD FERGUSON

Howard was never formally my teacher. I was introduced to him by Gerald and Joy at a Wigmore Hall recital shortly after going up for my first term at the R.A.M. (1951) Occasionally I was at a loose end, and from time to time he used to invite me up to Wildwood Road for supper and music. You may choose to read all sorts of things into those few words – (eg. for supper, read Luperalian Feast). But quite soon Howard and I reached a mutual understanding, out of which grew what I believe now to have been a truly Platonic relationship, of mentor and pupil, most fully and confidently expressed in the stream of letters we exchanged while I was doing my national service, first in Egypt and then in Cyprus.

At an extremely busy period of his life, when he was performing and touring a good deal with Yfrah Neaman and Denis Matthews, as well as composing and teaching, he would find time, often at the end of the day, to write these long, sometimes delightfully chatty, letters. They covered all sorts of topics: work in progress; reading; practical advice; and on a lighter note, food and drink; gossip; and I suppose what you might call ‘personal development’. Throughout, Howard’s extraordinarily generous nature shines through, his concern for me, my well-being: though he didn’t actually send me food parcels, sometimes books would arrive, which were even more appreciated. The massive two-volume edition of Langland’s *Piers Plowman* –

“...don’t be embarrassed: I shan’t make a habit of giving you Christmas presents! This is only because it’s pleasant to get things when one is away from home. It’s such fun undoing the string.”

One of the things that must have intrigued Howard when we first met was the fact that I had already composed a song-cycle to words by Denton Welch, on whose poems he had based his own ‘Discovery’. Now, three years later, here we were again covering much the same ground. I had put together a libretto for a colossal oratorio. (I did not imagine it would be so colossal: like all my musical aspirations at the time it was vague to the point of somnambulism).

17th March 1955: “... I look forward to getting the libretto of *Piers Plowman*. I asked you what you were going to do about making *Ye Olde Englishe* comprehensible to the ordinary listener. I’m still longing to know. At the best of times it’s hard enough to get words over when they are sung by a chorus; but if it’s Middle English they are trying to sing, it seems to me it might just as well be Chinese”.

A week later: “...I was so interested to get the libretto of your *Masque of Truth*... How long a work do you imagine it will be? A whole evening or less than that? To tell you the truth, I’m a bit worried about that side of it. Do you realize that the libretto contains about 4,000 words? This is an enormous amount when set to music, as you’ll see when I tell you that the whole of *Gerontius* contains only 2815 words; the whole of Gerald’s *Immortality Ode* only 1052... A rough average for this sort of writing would work at 1,200 words (say) equalling 1 hour’s music. So, horror of horrors, 4,000 would equal 3 hours and 20 minutes’ solid music, if my arithmetic serves me right! This, I think, might be a fraction too long”.

I’m glad to report that I paid heed to Howard’s gentle strictures, though that didn’t in the end save the whole enterprise from being a complete washout.

1st May 1955: "... Thank you for sending me the two titbits from the masque. I like the look of them... I am greatly relieved to know that you are limiting the work. I'm sure it will make a much better shape. Also, you will be spared the necessity of providing camp-beds for your audience".

While I was struggling to extract some musical and dramatic sense from Langland – and it was a nourishment to me, sweltering in the dry heat of the Egyptian desert, to envision Malvern, and the 'fair field full of folk' – Howard was also at last taking possession of that mediaeval world, in his setting of 'Quia Amore Languo'.

"...it's been buzzing about my head (and even in my notebooks) for more than 20 years. Why it should suddenly decide to deliver itself now, when I'm meant to be in the middle of a String 4tet, I can't tell you. But who should look a gift-horse in the mouth... specially when you've been hanging around hopefully for him for more than 20 years? Certainly not me. So into the drawer goes the String Quartet, and out comes the largest scoring paper I possess. All very gratifying, even if slightly puzzling".

In the ensuing letters he was to up-date me on how the work was progressing. And just five months later he was able to report:

16.10.55: "... I have been up to my eyes in writing. About ten days ago I finished the new work for Tenor, Chorus and Orchestra that I began at the end of March. As it's 25 minutes long, this is almost a record for me. True, it still has to be orchestrated: but that's a minor detail; and the main thing is that I'm very pleased with it... I've not set [the poem] complete, but left out about a third of the whole; and the result seems to me an astonishingly convincing musical shape".

26th November 1955: "... The scoring of Q.A.L. progresses. About a quarter of it is finished --- which isn't too bad, considering that I only began it at the beginning of the month. Never having scored for chorus and orchestra before, it is full of problems. I can only hope they'll come out all right. I'm using double woodwind, brass 4-2-3-1, Timps, Perc., harp and Strings. I would rather have liked triple WW; but all and sundry warned me that it is inclined to be limiting for performance, so I'm "making do", as they say".

22nd March 1956: "... I finished the full score of Amore Languo --- with a very loud sigh of relief! Now I have to go over the whole thing in the next few days, before sending it to Boosey and Hawkes to have the Parts copied, to make sure that I haven't written too many viola parts in the tenor clef, and suchlike".

25th June 1956: So glad you like the look of Amore Languo. I'm not altogether surprised that the very beginning and end seem slightly puzzling to you, as their effect does rather depend on having in mind the scoring. I'm enclosing the first 7 bars (not to be returned) so that you can see how they are laid out. It's a sound you wouldn't, perhaps, imagine from the look of the vocal score; yet it is essential to the musical idea".

Realizing that I must have felt cut off from friends and ‘out of the swim’, Howard would take pains to include in his letters bits of news and gossip.

May 1955: “... Poor Gerald is in rather a state, for he is in the middle of a Cello Concerto which has to be finished for Cheltenham Festival in July. A couple of months back, just when he was up to the eyes in it, he had to be rushed off to hospital for a rather complicated appendicitis operation which kept him from serious work for about six weeks. He’s over it now, but fearfully behindhand, of course. And to add to his troubles, he’s got to give three 60-minute lectures at the R.C.M., beginning on Friday next, on Words and Music or something like that. I must say I shouldn’t like to be in his shoes. He got about a third of the slow movement scored while I was down there. But the first movement isn’t scored yet, and the last movement isn’t even completely finished. He’s had some pretty hectic rushes in the past; but I don’t think they are anything to this”.

19th December 1955: “...Last night I went to Vaughan Williams’ house to hear a run-through of his Violin Sonata, which is having its first public performance at Wigmore tomorrow evening (it was broadcast about 6 months ago, but hasn’t been played since). It’s a strange piece. He has always said that he loathes the piano, and this certainly sounds like it. The poor creature is kept grinding away at what sounds like a very inadequate arrangement of a very un-pianistic orchestral score, while the violin, in order to make itself heard above the din, saws on fortissimo more or less from beginning to end. Not a happy effect. The pity of it is that it might be quite nice music --- though never a vintage work, I fancy --- if it were laid out for, say, violin and small orchestra. Anything rather than the piano, in fact. O dear, oh dear! why will people write for instruments they don’t LIKE?”

In the same letter, Howard, the inveterate raconteur – and you can hear his genial chuckle – passes on the following story:

“Vaughan Williams makes me think of something that happened after the first performance of his A minor String Quartet. As you may know, it is inscribed “For Jean on her birthday”, Jean being the viola of the Quartet who first played it. The day after the performance a notice of the occasion appeared in The Times, mentioning the dedication and adding that there was doubtless “some esoteric meaning in it, since the viola had a specially large part in the work and the name of the viola player concerned was Jean Stewart”. As soon as she read this, dear Jeannie rushed to the phone and rang up Isolde Menges, who had led the quartet. “Have you seen the notice in the Times?” she said. “Yes”, replied Isolde. “Well, whatever does esoteric mean?”, asked Jeannie. A slight pause followed, then Isolde replied, “Well, I’m not QUITE sure, dear; but I THINK it’s something like erotic, only worse”.

Two vignettes: his music-room at Wildwood Road, a large room, rather dark, lined with shelves of music, but quite cosy – deep (were they leather?) armchairs on either side of the fire; lamps; the piano taking up much of the space: a room steeped over decades in the smoke of cigars. Post-prandial torpor, out of which one would have to rouse oneself to play duets: Satie, Poulenc, Schubert. Or turn pages, while Howard would unfold for hours the glories of early keyboard music: John Bull, Purcell; the clavecin music of Couperin and d’Anglebert. Another occasion when he played through his recently composed ‘Dream of the Rood’, sketching in with his light, rather feeble composer’s voice, the soloist’s part; asking me to fill in the plainsong at the close – his hands shaking uncontrollably, his whole being - mine too.

Later we came to a pass where our minds no longer met: I had continued to show my work to him, and his integrity required of him absolute honesty. But he was clearly dismayed by the direction I was going; and when I went through 'Tombeau' with him at the piano – the big piece I had written for our mutual friend Stephen Bishop – he virtually shot me down in flames. Nothing was quite the same afterwards, though we still remained friends, and eventually when I married, he along with Joy Finzi and Ursula VW was one of the witnesses. (Appropriately he gave us a massive and very expensive cast iron casserole to set us in the right direction).

These letters – even these very brief extracts – testify to the rare quality of friendship and encouragement which he bestowed upon me as a young man of only twenty-one. What he had to say – his good sense and humanity, and his joie de vivre – still heartens me and amuses me as I re-read them now. How blessed I was in those early days in the company I was privileged to keep!

JEREMY DALE ROBERTS (2008)

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