

Notes on the music

The theme of this concert was inspired by the oft-quoted line written by Elgar to his publisher in 1900, during the composition of *The Dream of Gerontius*: 'This is what I hear all day – the trees are singing my music – or have I sung theirs?'. These words have since captured popular imagination because they show Elgar's conscious alignment of his music to a voice of nature. In 1914, when he composed **Two Choral Songs, *The Shower* and *The Fountain***, to texts of Henry Vaughan, he explicitly associated them with specific places both in the dedications (respectively, a previous neighbour in Malvern and a lay clerk at Worcester Cathedral) and in the footnotes (Mill Hill for *The Shower* and Totteridge for *The Fountain*). Mill Hill and Totteridge are now northern London suburbs, but in 1914 they would have been leafy green villages, as described by Elgar in a letter to his close friend and muse Alice Stuart-Wortley who was often the driver for these afternoon excursions out of London: 'I send you this very simple little thing for voices', Elgar wrote, continuing, 'only at the end I put *Mill Hill* to remind us of our afternoon when it was so cloudy & nice & lovely in Church yard looking over the vale'. Despite Elgar's belittling of his efforts, these songs contain deeply personal responses to weather, landscape, and a mysterious nature-spirit which while unspoken by the text is implicit among Vaughan's words and Elgar's music. Vaughan's presence itself establishes another link between these songs and the landscapes of Western England and the Welsh Border: the poet spent much of his life among the Brecon Beacons which can appear on the horizon when looking due West from the Malverns, especially where there is 'sunshine after rain'.

Travelling northwards from the Brecon Beacons and into the rugged beauty of Snowdonia National Park, Craig Ddu (or 'the Black Crag') lies between Mount Snowdon and Glyder Fawr in the Llanberis Pass and is so called as it spends most of its time covered in a sheen of damp lichen and dripping water. For the Pembrokeshire-born poet Arthur Symons, who later introduced British readers to French Decadence and Symbolism, a presumably first-hand experience of lying atop Craig Ddu inspired him to write an acutely realist 'impression of nature'. The poem's evocation of a dream-like state induced by lying beneath the bracken and among the highlands struck a chord in Symons's close contemporary and fellow nature worshiper Frederick Delius. In ***On Craig Ddu*** (1907) this profound experience of landscape is expressed through a richly textured river of music that slowly drifts, meanders and reveals itself as if purely of its own accord. It is an approach which attempts to capture the impression of physical landscape on the human psyche together with an idea of time similar to theories of 'real duration' being developed at that time by French philosopher Henri Bergson. Delius had been exploring these ideas since the visionary opening Dawn scene of his orchestral suite *Florida*, composed twenty years earlier. Yet ***On Craig Ddu*** is stylistically more akin to the famous ***On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*** (1912), which not only echoes the choral work's melodies and harmonies, but also develops the idea of an entranced encounter with nature and of music shimmering with springtime woodland light. The part-song also anticipates Delius's tone poem ***The Song of the High Hills*** (1911), a piece inspired by Delius's walking holidays in Norway and demonstrates the strong influence of mountain landscapes on the composer.

During Delius's lifetime, Scandinavian landscapes were becoming popular destinations for intrepid European tourists. Finland, however, was still largely undiscovered and undiscussed in travel literature partly due to it being a Grand Duchy of Russia until an unstable declaration of independence came in 1917. Leevi Madetoja belonged to a generation of Finns who were at first passionate about expressing the idea of Finland as being a culturally and historically autonomous nation and who would later suffer considerably from the ensuing Civil War of 1918. He lost both a brother and composer-friend Toivo Kuula in the fighting which claimed the lives

of around 36,000 Finns. From thereon he never quite recovered from the trauma and his scores from this point onwards are permeated with a tragic sense of twilight. **Onnelliset (The Happy Ones)** is an early-career work from 1911 while Madetoja was spending time in Paris after two years of private tuition with Sibelius. The music certainly reflects the youthful optimism of this period compared to **Kevätunta (Dream of Spring)**, from 1925, which casts an icy shadow of bare trees and still-frozen soil leading us to doubt whether Spring might even come at all.

In between these two works we hear Sibelius's **Sydämeni laulu (Song of my heart)**, a strophic miniature which shares the same lyricist as Madetoja's *Onnelliset* in Aleksis Kivi, Finland's national author. The song is sung by a mother to her recently deceased child, therefore aligning it with the tradition of a comforting yet tragic 'death lullaby' that originated in Russian folklore. Kivi adapted his poem to include locations from Finnish folklore, most prominently Tuonela, the Domain of Death, a far-off island circumnavigated by black swans. When Sibelius's first setting of this poem (for male choir) was premiered in 1898 it was described as being 'simple, original, and atmospheric', yet when he returned to make a mixed choir setting in 1908, he had experienced the loss of his youngest daughter, Kirsti, to typhoid fever in 1900. *Sydämeni laulu* subscribes very much to this idea of death as a very positive outcome – better the child dies prematurely rather than face the mother's life of hardship – however, in contrast to Delius whose music seems to emerge out of and dissipate back into silence, Sibelius chooses to have moments of silence within the song itself. One outcome of this is that it heightens the poem's sense of tragedy since our desire to hear the cathartic lullaby is hindered by a deathly silence. Alternatively, these moments of silence might also allow us to 'dream to the sound of the nightjar' and listen to the consoling voice of nature. On the latter, an observation of Sibelius in nature by the British writer on music Rosa Newmarch illustrates this point rather powerfully: 'To share Nature with [Sibelius] is a wonderful but silent experience'.

The Danish composer Rued Langgaard was consistently considered an outsider during his lifetime, mostly due to a musical establishment in Copenhagen which was strongly sceptical of his eccentricity and leanings towards theosophical symbolism. From the 1960s onwards, Langgaard began to be recognised for the experimentation and innovations in his orchestral scores, especially the works *Sinfonia interna* and *Sfærernes musik*, both of which were written around the same time as the choral piece **Lokkende toner** (1916). The song's text, by author and figurehead of Norwegian national romanticism Johan Sebastian Welhaven, locates us back within the awe-inspiring mountainous realms of Scandinavia with a lone traveller being enticed off the path by birdsong. The poem also hints towards nature's voice as being a potentially disruptive, mischievous agent. If the traveller is not careful, then they run the risk of becoming so entranced that they might never find the path again.

Already in the space of seven short pieces we have encountered many different versions of nature's voice and from a variety of different Northern European locations and cultural traditions. John Ireland's 1908 setting of **Spring, the Sweet Spring** takes us further back to Jacobean England with an exuberant text by Thomas Nash, a poet from Stratford-Upon-Avon who married Shakespeare's granddaughter, Elizabeth Hall, in 1626. It was Percy Bysshe Shelley, however, who arguably brought the idea of nature's music to its romantic epitome. In his 1815 poem *Alastor or The Spirit of Solitude* the aeolian harp, or wind harp, has a leading role symbolising the wind of inspiration which takes two forms: either, a gentle breeze which sweeps and sounds through nature inspiring the poet to reach new levels of understanding about the natural world, or an otherworldly music which unites the spiritual and the physical into a 'strange symphony' that, just as we saw in Sibelius's *Sydämeni laulu*, can make silence itself into a kind of music.

Elgar was similarly fascinated with the aeolian harp, and even had one installed in the window of his study which today can be seen at the Elgar Birthplace Museum. His 1907 setting using the final verse of Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* not only channels these very same ideas of inspiration, rejuvenation, and the power of a music originating in nature but also links back to the above quoted line penned in 1900. The very same ideas would also influence later poets

such as Coventry Patmore to write of 'a distant, dream-like sound' in *The River*. These very words receive special focus in Elgar's 1905 setting which he called **Evening Scene** and described as 'my best bit of landscape so far in that line'. Meanwhile, **Owls (An Epitaph)** is one of Elgar's most bewildering compositions in any genre, sustaining a thin line between levity and macabre throughout its three-minute duration. Elgar explained it as 'only a fantasy... the recurring *Nothing* is only an *owlish* sound' and dedicated the piece to 'My Friend Pietro D'Alba', who is none other than his daughter Carice's pet Angora rabbit Peter.

Vaughan Williams composed **Silence and Music** in 1953 as his contribution to 'A Garland for the Queen', in which ten composers and ten poets paid tribute to Elizabeth II in her coronation year. That same year he married the poem's author, Ursula Wood, who encouraged her new husband to rekindle his composing after a two-year hiatus and wrote the libretto for works such as the Christmas cantata *Hodie*. The music beautifully captures the poem's understated celebration of nature in which the speaker is both uplifted and bewitched by a sound swelling out of silence, with floating harmonies and breezes sweeping through the piece before a more prayerful section introduces an introspective human presence. The same meditative space belongs to much of Arvo Pärt's music, and especially so in **The Deer's Cry** which takes its text from the ancient Lorica of St Patrick. Forest silence is similarly cherished in Estonia as it is in neighbouring countries. Its place within Pärt's music has recently been honoured by the new Arvo Pärt Centre which has been built to weave among the pine trees at Laulasmaa in Northern Estonia, and offers visitors the chance to sit and observe the forest in silence.

Many of us have probably had our fair share of silence during the past fourteen months, and it seems that the only ones who have been allowed to carry on singing live are the birds. My piece, **Now welcome, Somer** is a light-hearted attempt to come to terms with this using a song from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowles*. In what has since been described as a 'dream-vision', the narrator of *Parliament of Fowles* falls asleep in the prologue and dreams about the goddess Nature playing matchmaker to a whole host of birds. The birds who are not successfully matched are invited to try again next Spring, and love remains a mystery to the slumberous narrator. *Parliament of Fowles* is the first-known literary instance of a pairing between St. Valentine and love. St. Valentine was a third-century Roman martyr, persecuted for his Christian faith, but whose story contains nothing specifically concerning love. Chaucer's poem is suspected to have been written for King Richard II (1367-1400), during the negotiations of his marriage to Anne of Bohemia in the 1370s.

Another piece infused with birdsong, albeit from very different species of birds, Ross Edwards's **Sacred Kingfisher Psalms** was written between Sydney and the Blue Mountains and is directly influenced by the composer's subconscious absorption of the sounds of the South Eastern coastal environment of Australia. Following Phrygian and pentatonic dances and meditations on Psalms 1 and 131, the piece springs abruptly into a vigorous chanting of bird names in the Eora language of the Aboriginal people who inhabited the area that is now Sydney long before Europeans arrived in Australia. Prominent among these birds is the dyaramak – the sacred kingfisher – a close relation of the kookaburra. The composer writes: 'these ancient texts have in common a strong sense of the spirit and significance of place and an awareness and acceptance of implicit natural laws recognized throughout the ages as being essential for balance and harmony, renewal – and, ultimately, survival'.

George Parris