THE FINZI JOURNAL

2023

THE 2023 JOURNAL OF THE FINZI FRIENDS

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EDITORIAL

It is good to be writing the foreword to another edition of the annual Finzi Journal. This has been a year of change for *Finzi Friends* but the significance of publishing the Journal at the end of each year remains undimmed.

Sadly, one significant change has been the loss in September of Jennie McGregor-Smith. Jennie's position as a Vice-President of *Finzi Friends* reflected her years of commitment to the society. Tribute is duly paid later in the Journal in respect of her roles as Committee member, co-founder of Ludlow English Song and long-time promoter of the music to which this publication is committed. It is appropriate at this point, however, to mark with gratitude Jennie's role in preparing the Journal for publication meticulously for many years.

The *Finzi Friends* is looking towards the future with confidence, and alongside the Finzi Trust as they prepare for the ending of copyright in Finzi's music in 2026. A meeting between leaders of both groups in the summer resulted in agreement to closer collaboration, including a similar meeting annually. One point agreed during the meeting was the significance of publications such as this, together with the *Finzi Friends* website, in providing resources for those studying Finzi's life and music or coming afresh to his output. To this end we continue to provide access to past journals and newsletters online via our website.

The role of this Journal as a resource cannot be better illustrated than by our featured article this year from Stephen Banfield. We are extremely grateful to Stephen for his offer to share his correspondence with Joy Finzi during the years 1975-1977. These letters are a true treasure trove, giving insights as they do into recording projects; artists and musicians from that time involved in those projects and in the creation of the memorial window in Ashmansworth Church; and into the character of Joy Finzi. They add to a continuing archive we are creating through

publishing the memories or letters of those who knew Gerald or Joy Finzi, or who have family connections and recollections of such relationships. We warmly welcome all approaches to add to that archive via Eric Hazelwood, our Secretary.

It is good to be able to include within the Journal Ian Deary's impressions of the Finzi Day held at the University of St Andrews in February 2023. Many will know that the university holds significant Finzi archives. It also has significance through Finzi's fruitful relationship with Cedric Thorpe Davie, Master of Music at St Andrew's. Much of their correspondence (from 1933 onwards) is now available within Diana McVeagh's edition of Finzi's Letters.

Many will know that the *Finzi Friends* seeks to involve the newest generation of performers, academics and listeners in its promotion of interest in Finzi. It was a delight therefore to be able to ask burgeoning soprano Holly Teague to share her thoughts on her preparations for her first professional performance of *Dies Natalis* in November 2023.

Former *Finzi Friends* Chairman Paul Spicer's biography of Sir Arthur Bliss, *Standing out from the Crowd* was published during 2023. It gives a picture of British music and beyond stretching across most of the twentieth century and so it is fitting that this Journal includes a review of this much-anticipated volume.

May 2023 saw the release of a significant CD by Londinium, conducted by Andrew Griffiths on the SOMM label. This includes many first recordings of Kenneth Leighton's choral music. As a composer whom Finzi encouraged, we are always interested to encounter new resources relating to Leighton. It is a pleasure to welcome back Tom Coxhead as reviewer of the disc. Another member of the 'new' generation, Tom has previously shared his research on Leighton's Latin Mass settings in the Journal.

A similar CD of 'rarities', this time of piano music by Herbert Howells, recorded by the indefatigable Matthew Schellhorn is reviewed by Matthew Pope, another returnee to the Journal. Watch out for the release in 2024 of Matthew's next project, a disc of new piano music which *Finzi Friends* was pleased to be able to support financially.

Composers include Paul Spicer, Francis Pott and Martin Bussey alongside many other familiar names. It would normally be almost a reflex action to type against Howells' name the phrase 'a long-term friend of Finzi' but you may be interested to read Joy Finzi's comment on their friendship in Stephen Banfield's article!

Finzi, his life, music and his circle of friends and colleagues, continue to attract great interest and curiosity even as the years since his untimely death grow. Through the Journal, newsletter and e-bulletins, *Finzi Friends* will continue to promote such interest and reflect the diverse ways in which Finzi's highly individual musical voice, with its integrity and melodic appeal, continues to be heard.

Martin Bussey
November 2023

OBITUARY

for: Jennie McGregor-Smith

It was with regret and deep sadness that we heard of the death of Jennie McGregor-Smith in a road accident only one week after she had attended our Chosen Hill event early in September this year.

Jennie seized the opportunity to become a member of the *Finzi Friends* right from the beginning and very quickly became a Committee member, immersing herself in the organisation of events. In the early days, she was invaluable to Hilary and Kiffer in organising the artists and lunches at Church Farm. Her endeavours also ensured the smooth running of many aspects of the *Friends* through sheer hard work and focussed application. Latterly she edited and published the Journal for many years.

At events, she made all feel welcome and took an interest in each member with attention to ensuring their enjoyment and satisfaction. All were pleased to make her acquaintance and enjoy her company, sharing her love of music.

Jennie was also instrumental in creating the Ludlow English Song Weekend with Jim Page, working alongside Iain Burnside. Between them they created a three-day event where each day was packed with a full

programme. They were tireless in securing sufficient funding and talented artists of national renown, which required planning for years ahead.

In addition, on her own, she created and directed a summer programme of Sunday 'Celebrating English Song' recitals and talks located at Tardebigge near Bromsgrove. Her reputation attracted many *Friends* to these events, which were always well attended. A key aspect of the series was Jennie's commissioning of new song cycles from a wide range of composers.

As a result of this gift of her time and effort to the *Friends* we did not hesitate to confer on her the role of a Vice-President of the Society when she stepped down from the Committee. We were honoured when she accepted.

Her work for the *Finzi Friends*, extensive though it was, represented only part of her voluntary commitment to numerous organisations.

Jennie was an arts phenomenon in Bromsgrove. For many years, through Bromsgrove Concerts, she helped bring classical music to the town. She played pivotal roles in starting The Bromsgrove Society, the literary organisation WORDS, Bromsgrove Arts Alive, Bromsgrove Concerts and Artrix. She published books on the Bromsgrove architect John Cotton and *From Bromsgrove to Aston Fields: A Story of Victorian Expansion* is a meticulously researched comprehensive local history.

Alongside all this for thirty-two years she contributed very significantly to The Housman Society. She joined the committee in 1987 when Jim Page took over the chairmanship and began a new era. At that time he recruited Robin Shaw as treasurer, Jeremy Bourne, Alan Holden, Roy Birch and Valerie Richardson. There followed some vibrant years for the society leading up to the celebration of the centenary of *A Shropshire Lad's publication* in 1896.

Can ever a literary society have done more for a centenary? A literary weekend in Ludlow packed with notable speakers; a musical weekend in Bromsgrove; a special performance by the CBSO at Ludlow, conducted by Sir Simon Rattle with Thomas Allen; a commemoration in

Westminster Abbey; events at St John's College, Oxford and University College London; a National Poetry Competition; and the commissioning of song settings, and books.

Jennie played a very important part in all this. It began 1991 when she took on the role of fund raiser and programme director to the centenary sub-committee. She was amazingly successful in raising funds - something which requires special skills. She obtained vital grants, and it is worth mentioning that a significant proportion of the Society's healthy financial assets today are the results of Jennie's fund raising. She co-ordinated activities and maintained a flow chart showing the detail who was doing what and when. She worked tirelessly at administration, phoning, writing, typing, designing programmes, brochures and leaflets. Everything she did was of professional quality.

In 1996 she was Chair of the West Midlands branch of the National Federation of Music Societies and to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of the organisation (later to be called Making Music) she led the organisation of simultaneous performances of Verdi's Requiem in Worcester, Coventry and Lichfield Cathedrals, with the three best orchestras in the region conducted by Paul Spicer, Guy Woolfenden and Michael Lloyd. Singers from far and wide signed up to take part resulting in over a thousand performers participating on the day.

This sort of administration Jennie did for so many organisations. Her achievements were recognised by the award of the British Empire Medal.

THE LETTERS OF JOY FINZI

Joy Finzi, Yo-Yo Ma, and the Finzi Cello Concerto recording

Stephen Banfield

It was September 1975, and I had completed my three years as a registered (and fully supported) DPhil student at St John's College, Oxford. By then I should have finished my thesis on early 20th-century English song (it became the book *Sensibility and English Song*), but nobody submitted within three years in those days and it didn't seem to matter. I had written about half of it, longhand, and put it away in a filing cabinet at my parents' home while I went off to the USA for a year on a Frank Knox Fellowship at Harvard University, supposedly to study Charles Ives and American music, although nobody would ever call me in on this and the main thing was to be a good ambassador for English culture while broadening one's intellectual and cultural awareness. The latter aim was certainly fulfilled—it was the most important year I ever spent anywhere.

I had met Joy a number of times, as well as Diana McVeagh, while researching Finzi for my thesis. I had been to Ashmansworth in my elderly Morris Minor while Joy was still living there and then visited the Chieveley cottage once or twice. Joy even came to the concert I conducted in Oxford with the Kodaly Choir and orchestra in 1974. I was planning a booklet on Finzi's Hardy songs for Lewis Foreman's Triad Press series and had more or less completed it. Joy read it and was extremely helpful with her observations. I must have given her my hall of residence address at Harvard before I arrived there, which I didn't do until about the second week of September. It was characteristically thoughtful of her to have planned that I should find a letter from her on arrival: I was desperately homesick at first.

Yew Tree Cottage
North Heath
Chieveley
Berks

3.9.75

Dear Stephen,

Thank you for your letter just in. And this to welcome you on the other side of the Atlantic & every good wish for a year full of scope and interest for you.

I met Lewis Foreman at the Walthamstow recordings. He was there the day that Diana [McVeagh] came to hear Peter Katin play the Fantasia & Toccata & Eclogue & again to hear Ian Partridge sing Farewell to Arms & the Milton Sonnets. It was a fascinating three days—or rather 2½—fascinating to see how the works shaped into their final form. Tod [Vernon] Handley very alive & into them and handling the orchestra well so that there was no friction or fatigue. The two records will be—Clarinet Concerto with John Denman soloist (a very intimate relationship with Tod) & a volatile & imaginative performance, on the 1st side. 2nd side soloist Peter Katin in the Fantasia & Toccata & Eclogue. He was very tired but warmed up to it and gave a much more embracing performance than he did at the 1st London performance over 20 years ago—more power & protest which the Fantasia needs & the Toccata came off better than we had expected as I had always felt it was rather tacked on for the occasion. The New Philharmonia orchestra were very good & chosen for their warmth of string tone. A nostalgic performance for J[ohn] C[arol] C[ase] the last time that he will sing the Shakespeare songs after 25 years. I can see why he is retiring in April & giving his last public performance at the Festival Hall in April. He is past his prime and skill and effort are needed to maintain his standard, the meaning of words has become accentuated, and he no longer sings the invocation by Cymbeline's graveside in that soft withdrawn voice which he used before & was quite magical. Probably for a recording this would not have come over. Ian Partridge unfailingly perceptive in both pieces & I enjoyed the Milton Sonnets in the full orchestral score—though the players found

the rather gritty clashes rather perplexing coming as it did at the end of the sessions, rather than as it was written in his twenties. Howard [Ferguson] had not heard it before & I am not sure myself whether I have, though it is very familiar and one I have always liked. In terra pax will complete the baritone side of the record & Ian fills the other.

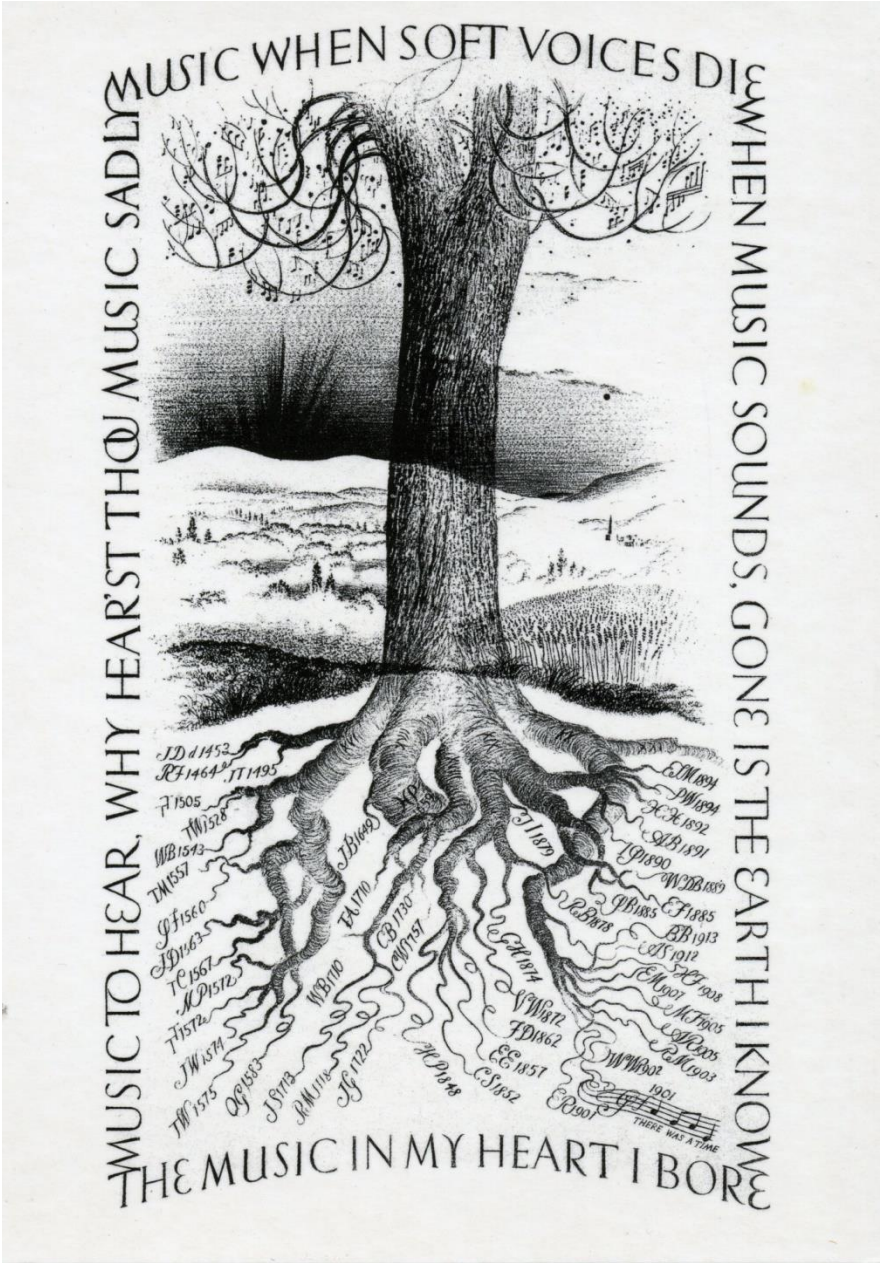
Both John & Ian will be recording the two posthumous song groups of miscellaneous poets in May or June of next year. I am trying to get Clifford Benson for John as Howard says he is by far the best pianist that he has ever heard play G's songs. Yes—the Cello Concerto shall be next & I'm invisibly signalling for a super cellist!

I am enclosing this notice *[a flyer for the Window to English Music]* in case you come across people who might wish to join in its making—a list of names will be in the Church. The engraved window will be exhibited at the Fine Art Society in Dec with an exhibition of Laurence Whistler's glass & goblets and another window for Oxford. It will be seen by a much wider public, for he draws great numbers to his rarely shown work. I think [the] Ashmansworth little window should be good. He is at his best in a confined space and has chosen glass ½ inch thick so that engraved on both sides it will give the illusion, as you pass by, that the tree moves across the landscape behind. Spring blossoming & dawn on the left—ripening corn & 'the breath of the storm' on the right. The ethereal tree itself buds open against a starlit sky. He & I went up & finally placed the position of the windowsill & they have started replastering the walls. Ann will not paint the names on until late November or December to give it time to dry out. Dunstable starts the list & Britten ends, born 1913, on the eve of the first world war. I expect January 1st might see it finally in position. Contributions are trickling in and it is lovely to think of it being made possible by the generosity of many. It is a strange co-incidence that the four composers who were killed in the 1st war all come together in a sequence—Butterworth, Ernest Farrar, W Denis Browne & Ivor Gurney.

Hasting—but this to wish you well.

Joy

I noted Joy's phrase 'invisibly signalling for a super cellist'.


MUSIC WHEN SOFT VOICES DIE
WHEN MUSIC SOUNDS, GONE IS THE EARTH I KNOW
MUSIC TO HEAR, WHY HEAR'ST THOU MUSIC SADLY
THE MUSIC IN MY HEART I BORE
THERE WAS A TIME
1901

Yew Tree Cottage
North Heath
Chieveley
Berks

4.1.76

Dear Stephen,

A Happy New Year!

I thought that you would like to have this folder of the marvellous little window that Laurence Whistler has engraved. The photo cannot give the full sense of depth and dimension that he has achieved from using glass ½ inch thick, the landscape engraved behind & the ethereal tree in front, but it gives something of the feeling that he has put in it. I'm also sending you for your interest the programme of the music that we are offering to those who made it possible to celebrate its installation. The official dedication will not be until April 4 when the plaster will be dry enough for Ann Hechle to paint the names on it.

I hope you are finding life full of interest and scope and that you are extending yourself on all fronts.

Time moves so swiftly that it soon will be time for your return unless you have extended the original stay.

Best wishes for 1976

Joy Finzi

My original intention had been to return to the UK as soon as the academic teaching year ended, which it does in very early May in the USA—hence her comment above. I had also quickly moved out of the Harvard hall of residence to a shared student house right on the waterfront north of Boston (see Google Street View for the address below: they have rebuilt the house since I lived in it, and it is a lot smarter now).

359 Rice Avenue
Revere, MA 02151
USA

27 January 1976

Dear Joy,

On the back of this sheet and on the two subsequent pages you will find the last little addition to the Triad Press monograph. Lewis said he wanted 'a brief introduction to Finzi, who he was, etc, particularly for the American readers who have bought the Musical Heritage Society discs but know no more', so this is what I've given him. It will come after your introduction but before the rest of my text. I've sent a copy to Lewis, but told him not to act on incorporating it into the proofs (which I've just sent back corrected) until he receives a go-ahead from you, because I want to make sure you don't think it too inappropriate. I didn't want to write it at first, but having done so feel that perhaps it eases one into the booklet quite attractively.

Could you check it—I've had to write it without reference to my source materials, which are still in England—for inaccuracies and/or misrepresentations, and, if there aren't any, give Lewis the go-ahead *immediately*? If there's anything that should be altered or questioned, perhaps you could mention it to Lewis—just so that he knows what the situation is—and at the same time write to me to get it changed. I've put squiggly red lines under things I'd particularly like you to confirm the accuracy of.

How are things at Chieveley? Have you made any plans for recording the Cello Concerto yet? I haven't heard much English music since I left for the USA—though Andrew Davis did an Elgar/Tippett programme with the Boston SO a couple of weeks ago—and have felt pretty homesick for it and for the countryside (not to mention for buildings, *any* buildings, over 150 years old!), though my year in America is proving eminently enjoyable. Telling you even a little bit about it and my impressions of this country and its people would take pages, so that must wait till I'm back home and we can meet up again. I trust you're keeping well and busy.

Yours ever,

Stephen

*****

Yew Tree Cottage
North Heath
Chieveley
Berks

4.1[*recte* 2?].76

Dear Stephen,

I have just phoned Louis [*sic*] Foreman & read him your letter and he says there is plenty of time for you to have this back to correct, for he will not again be dealing with it until the end of April.

The first correction is necessary to explain the phenomenon. (I like the way you used this to plot a landscape of inheritance). *[I had started with Finzi's experience of a Brocken spectre on the Cotswold escarpment, apparently casting his shadow right across the Severn valley.]*

He only became friendly with Howells during this period before Howells was caught up in the world & he never became a great friend.

Berkshire Downs in our first house out of London, and the Hampshire Downs at Ashmansworth, even though postally we are tied to Berks.

Mediterranean is right, and an Italian moving through Portugal with Jewish strain on his Father's side.

Camberley was his last educational experience and he was proud of being entirely self-educated, for he learnt nothing while he was there! He believed strongly in Dr Johnson's dictum 'never learn anything unless the not knowing of it is a positive nuisance'.

'Apart from an intensive seven years in London from 1926, where he studied counterpoint with R O Morris, etc' is more accurate.

He simply soaked up everything & heard & saw and listened to all that was offered, & this was very important at that moment & enabled him to leave it all very happily in 1933.

He made friends with younger composers through their work & performing it & though he corresponded with [Anthony] Milner he never met him & we performed [a?] work of his after G's death.

[Paragraph about a planned Cardiff University film of the Hardy songs omitted.]

Did I send you a window folder? Here is the programme we gave in celebration to those who helped to make it possible. It is a marvellous piece of work done with great feeling. This was a moving occasion—JCC's swan singing of these songs which we have done with him over 25 years & he never sang better. I was rather pleased with the programme.

So glad you are finding America stimulating—a Professor Sandy Linscomb—University Northern Colorado Greel[e]y, Colorado has been over doing research on G's songs & is writing an introduction to them for singing teachers etc.

'How swift is time'—you will soon be back!!

Warm greetings

Joy

*****

Yew Tree Cottage
North Heath
Chieveley
Berks

23.2.76

Dear Stephen,

I rang up Diana after your query about 1925 or 1926 being the year that GF went to London. She wonders how you got 1925, and

supposed that it was due to the Festival Hall programme note prefacing John Russell's concert. They sold their Painswick house early in 1925 & went to stay in Chosen Hill and during that year GF went up to London to have lessons with R O Morris which terminated at the end of the year when RO went to America for a year *[*recte *two years]*. He used to go up frequently and no doubt was already oriented towards London, but in fact did not go to live there until January 1926. I have forgotten the name of the woman they stayed with at Chosen Hill *[it was Mrs Champion]* but I think it was the same address that they had originally stayed at when they came south from Harrogate & that was the time G had run into Howells there. I presume that Grannie also found the East Anglia house during 1926 where she went to live eventually.

Diana is busy completing her revised entry for GF for Grove & hopes to get this finished soon and out of the way so that she can then press forward with completing her work on him. She is so much better now & I feel that this year will see a completion.

During the year 1925 G travelled up almost weekly or near abouts & returned often after a concert or theatre on the 1 am milk train to Gloucestershire.

He did in fact I think work at odd times later with RO but the first concentrated period was during 1925 from Chosen Hill. Caroline Street began in 1926.

[Cardiff film paragraph omitted.]

The Cello Concerto seems to be coming to the fore in idea from various sources & no doubt we shall somehow manage to get this on record in 1977. Lewis F sent me a copy of the Ivor Gurney pamphlet which is a decorative piece of presentation & is of value as the first of that to come in print.

Warm greetings

Joy

Some time in the spring, before I left Harvard at the beginning of June for a three-months' car trip around the USA, Canada, and Mexico, I had heard the young cellist Yo-Yo Ma give a concert in the Sanders

Theatre at Harvard. He was already a celebrity in the USA, having been a child prodigy and junior Juilliard student, but had decided to postpone the beginning of his professional career while he undertook a four-year undergraduate degree at Harvard just like any other student. He was about to graduate, and I may have mentioned the Finzi concerto to him backstage and got his phone number. I must have written enthusiastically to Joy about him, spotting an obvious answer to her invisible signalling, but clearly did not keep a carbon copy of that letter.

Yew Tree Cottage
North Heath
Chieveley
Berks

16.4.76

Dear Stephen,

Thank you for your letter & for all your interesting news. I rang up Itter (Lyrita) and read the relevant passages to him.

He feels that unless we had an opportunity to hear your Yo Yo Ma or the opportunity of having him in England for any length of time it would not be feasible economically as well as it being an unknown quantity. However brilliant he is, and will be, it does not necessarily mean that he would have an understanding and liking for the Concerto, which would be an unfamiliar idiom to him. It would be a good idea perhaps for him to see the work before one even considered the idea. At the moment we are trying to complete the records & In Terra Pax full orchestral version is the next on the list so there is no immediate consideration this year. I had thought that perhaps Igloi might be the person—I have admired what I have heard of his playing very much but nothing has gone beyond that stage.

It would be interesting to hear any tapes (which you cd always have back) but playing familiar concertos which are part of the whole cello repertoire is a very different thing from an unknown piece. It might be worthwhile him seeing the work—but only if there was a chance of him being in England for any period in the future, as we could not finance him. Increasing rising costs make it very difficult for

us to produce the record at all, though one hopes that by the time we do it some returns from other records would make it possible. Intimations is doing quite well.

[Cardiff film paragraph omitted.]

I'm glad your booklet is coming out this summer. I have not heard anything about it at all.

Foreman sent me the Gurney pamphlet which was attractively produced & I sent it to the poet P J Kavanagh who is doing a Gurney programme at the Literary Festival in Cheltenham & he has sent it to the BBC in the hope of a programme from them. He loves the poetry & does not know anything about the music. I have put Michael Hurd on to him, for he has just finished the life & music aspect of him & Peter Bayley from Durham will contribute on the poetry—and a Professor Trethow[a]n on his mental illness. *[In the event Hurd wrote the whole Gurney book himself.]*

So glad you are enjoying America & getting a lot out of it—I presume that you will not return to England until the autumn.

The dedication of the Window was on the 4th and the artist calligrapher Ann Hechle has made a beautiful framework for it with the painted names & dates of the composers in wings on each side under the over arching a celebration of English music! The essential quality of the window design showed up sharply on the MT with the wide white surround. An alteration of size is always a testing & it looked very striking. It cannot give the depth of dimension which the original gives & which makes it so unusual.

Diana McVeagh is very much on form again & hopes to finish the life by the autumn. She has done the sleeve notes for the new Lyrita records.

All good wishes & thanks for your suggestion.

Joy

*****

Yew Tree Cottage
North Heath
Chieveley
Berks

20.5.76

Dear Stephen,

In case this catches you before you leave. I have heard today that Itter (Lyrita Recorded Edition) has heard that Yo Yo Ma is booked by Isaac Stern [*Joy Finzi footnote:* Brahms Double Concerto] to play with the London Philharmonic in September 1977 in London. With the tragic death of Igloi, this now seems to be a possibility for G's Cello Concerto. Itter is going to try & get Boosey & Hawkes to send out score & part to Yo Yo Ma and see whether there might [be] a chance of him being able to do it. His fare is being paid so that would not come onto us. He had also heard glowing accounts of him from a young composer who had heard him in America & thanks to your suggestion this all seems to click into place!

This may not catch you before you go, but I thought it was worth trying in case you might have a chance of contacting Yo Yo Ma & presenting him with the idea.

The sudden death of David Munro[w] seems a great tragic loss on our scene—he had opened up so many avenues & with such zest & enjoyment.

I hope you have a rewarding tour before you return home—it seems hardly possible that your time in America has come & gone already!

The RVW Trust have guaranteed support for the recording so that we can contemplate it!

Thank you indeed for your suggestion—which when I last wrote seemed hardly possible—and now seems considerably likely!

Arrevederci [*sic*]

Joy

*****

359 Rice Avenue
Revere, MA 02151
USA

24 May 1976

Dear Joy,

Just a brief note in reply to yours, which arrived today. I phoned up Yo-Yo Ma this evening; he'd not heard anything about the London booking, yet, but we assumed that the information was correct since he does have an agent in London and has played with Isaac Stern before. His home address, in case Richard Itter doesn't have it, is *[left blank for* Journal *purposes, just in case he or the family still lives there!]* New York, NY 100*[ditto]*, and the phone number's (212) *[ditto]*. I'm so glad the recording may work out well. Apart from Yo-Yo's superb musicianship, he's also perfectly charming and unaffected as a person, and puts an amazing amount of effort and feeling into everything that he does. I think it would be a good idea for a copy of the score to be sent to him—I doubt whether one could be found on this side of the Atlantic, alas! I should love to have been able to play it over with him a couple of times myself, but I set off on the Grand Tour with a couple of friends next week and Yo-Yo won't be around in New York when I pass through at the beginning of September. Incidentally, if anything interesting crops up during the summer—it would be nice to be kept in touch—I can be reached c/o 35 Frost Road, Belmont, MA 02178, USA *[home of the delightful choir secretary of the church where I played the organ for four months: I am still in touch with her]*, whence mail will be forwarded to me at various points on our itinerary. I should be back in England (looking for a job) on 17 September.

I was sorry to hear from you of the deaths of David Munrow and Thomas Igloi. Whatever caused that of Munrow? I must say I had been very impressed with Igloi's performance of such an obscure masterpiece as Bridge's *Oration* for cello and orchestra, for which he obviously had a great deal of feeling and insight.

Trusting that you are keeping well and enjoying the delights of your fabulous cottage and its setting, even though England seems to be becoming more and more of a Banana Republic! Though I love her intensely as my home country, this is hardly the best time to be relinquishing America and looking for a job! My time here has worked out so well.

Yours ever,

Stephen

*****

from
Hill View
Inkpen
Newbury 544

19 January 1977

Dear Stephen,

Thank you for letting me know your whereabouts, and I can't remember whether I sent you my change of address card.

It comes with best wish for the New Year. I shall not actually be in until early March, and at the moment the above address of a valiant friend will find me quickest, though I am often at Bushey Leaze seeing the work progressing. (My caravan sojourn was terminated by burst water pipes, which the owner forgot to turn off in my absence at Christmas.)

I have just been talking to Itter (Lyrita Recorded Edition) about Yo Yo Mao [*sic*] visiting here in July. It is earlier than they originally expected in September & it is not easy to fix up the orchestra one especially wants etc, but he & I feel that we shd have him for a recording of the Cello Concerto & his agent is willing for this. No mention of *his* reactions to it! I was wondering whether you were in contact with him & knew of his response to the work. One so hopes that he has found something which he enjoys. I understand that he has had score & part for some time. I think his performance with Isaac

Stern is to be in Liverpool—the recording will be in London. Itter is himself contributing largely to the record as he feels that it may be to his advantage to record one so promising in his early days.

I hope life is full of opportunities for you & that you are well—

Warm greetings

Joy

*****

Bushey Leaze
Hill Green
Leckhampstead
Newbury
Berks

22.3.77

Dear Stephen,

I thought that you would like to know that, thanks to you, Yo Yo Ma is performing G's Cello Concerto with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra / Tod Handley at Watford Town Hall on

Monday July 4th

This was the best that Itter could do, though I think he would have preferred the New Philharmonia, but this was not possible. So we have just to cross our fingers & hope that the work really finds fertile soil in Yo Yo Ma & that he can bring real quality to it.

Hope all goes well with you & that work prospers & life generally.

Warm greetings

Joy

Lyrita stereo SRCS 92 just out. Clarinet Concerto, Eclogue & Grand Fantasia & Toccata.

I was not able to attend the concert. Nor was I present at this first recording of the Finzi Cello Concerto, with Yo-Yo Ma as soloist. It appeared on Lyrita in due course, though I'm not sure I ever discovered Joy's reaction to it and to him! My Triad Press booklet was abandoned, I forget why, much of it appearing instead in my chapter on Finzi's Hardy songs in *Sensibility and English Song*. As for the job I was looking for (and no, September 1976 was not a good time to be returning to Britain, soon to be forced to apply for an IMF loan), it took two years to arrive: a Lectureship in Music at Keele University, where I spent a happy and productive 14 years. Until then I freelanced from an Oxfordshire base.

Stephen David Banfield is a musicologist, music historian and retired academic. He was Elgar Professor of Music at the University of Birmingham from 1992 to 2003, and then Stanley Hugh Badock Professor of Music at the University of Bristol from 2003 to his retirement at the end of 2012; he has since been an emeritus professor at Bristol.

Amongst his many publications we all know him predominantly for his comprehensive Finzi biography published in 1997.

GERALD FINZI THE MAN AND HIS MUSIC

Laidlaw Music Centre, University of St Andrews
11th February 2023

By Ian Deary

"Wasn't that gorgeous?!" exuded Alan George (viola) of the Fitzwilliam String Quartet after they had just played a version of Gerald Finzi's *Prelude for Strings* (op. 25). It was.

As was the day: gorgeous, moving, interesting, informative, and rare. Rare, because we *Finzi Friends* and fans in Scotland don't have many live Finzi performances nearby. This was a feast. We heard Finzi songs and chamber pieces, we had informative talks on Finzi, and a selection of Finzi's letters and his music collection were on display. The link to the University of St Andrews in Fife was Finzi's friend Cedric Thorpe Davie OBE, FRSE (Ceddie or Ceddy to Finzi when corresponding), who moved to St Andrews University in 1945 to become Master of Music; thereafter, he founded their Department of Music, and was elevated to full Professor of Music. Notably, Thorpe Davie helped secure, for the University of St Andrews, Finzi's 18th century music collection. The day was introduced to us by Dr Michael Downes, the current Director of Music at the University of St Andrews.

In the morning's first session, bass-baritone Jonathan May (Head of Vocal Studies at St Andrews) and pianist Tom Wilkinson (University of St Andrews organist) performed six Finzi songs. From *Let us Garlands Bring* (op. 18) they included 'Come Away, Come Away Death', 'Who Is Silvia?', 'Fear No More the Heat o' the Sun', and 'O Mistress Mine'. They also performed 'Amabel' from *Before and After Summer* (op. 16) and 'For Life I had Never Cared Greatly' from *From I Said to Love* (op. 19b). They listed five more on the programme, but Jonathan ably and

engagingly used some of their slot's time to introduce the audience to Finzi and his musical landscape, including reflections on his not being fashionable in various periods. He also made remarks on each song before he sang them, and sometimes afterwards: for example, didn't we love Sylvia?; wasn't Mistress Mine a chat-up attempt?; and, regarding Amabel, don't men develop paunches and baldness? Of course, the lyrics afforded the opportunity to talk about Finzi's relationship with the words of Hardy and Shakespeare, and about love (sometimes unrequited) and, of course, the passage of time, and death. One wee thing: I was sorry that they omitted 'To Lizbie Browne' (from *Earth and Air and Rain*, op. 15) as it is a personal favourite. It is unusual to have the interleaving of art songs with comments on their text and music, and this often worked well. Jonathan hadn't provided us with the texts—to prevent our eyes being directed to our laps; his brief orientating remarks and clear diction told the stories.

The second morning session comprised three talks. Rachel Hart, Head of Archives and Rare Books at University of St Andrews, outlined what the university holds from Finzi's library, and which extracts would be shown especially for us in the Foyer of the Laidlaw Centre. The exhibition was excellent. The letters, manuscripts, and scores were fascinating, and the library staff's members were knowledgeable and helpful; they encouraged us to come back and see and use other items in the whole collection. A thoughtfully-chosen and delightful-to-see example was Finzi's postcard to Thorpe Davie (from 1955) in which he praised a young Diana McVeagh's work on Elgar ("first-rate"). Speaking of whom… Diana McVeagh then gave a talk (via Zoom; it had been recorded previously) on some of Finzi's letters and the Finzi-Thorpe Davie association, entitled, "How did Gerald Finzi's collection of 18th century music end up at the University of St Andrews?" This included the fascinating episode when, for three years in the early 1950s, Finzi was the external examiner for the University of St Andrews Music Department*. She described the Finzi materials as "one of the core holdings of the music collection of the university," explained how Thorpe-Davie had raised £3000 to secure them for St Andrews and encouraged their use by scholars. Speaking of whom… Zen Kuriyama then exemplified this use in his talk, 'Dear Ceddie': Discovering Gerald Finzi through his correspondence with St Andrews' Cedric Thorpe Davie'. In an absorbing, enthusiastically-delivered, and beautifully-illustrated talk, given live via

Zoom at 5.30am Chicago time, many topics were covered: the Finzi-Thorpe Davie friendship, Thorpe Davie's career milestones, Finzi's external examinership at St Andrews, Finzi's being "early in the baroque revival", and some of their comments on each other's compositions. Kuriyama's points were made using annotated examples of the Finzi letters in the St Andrews collection, mostly in chronological order. Additionally, he showed the humour in the correspondence, for example in a Finzi letter about possible wedding gifts for Thorpe Davie. And, during his presentation, he worried away at what he viewed as Finzi's unfair status, commenting on the "under-rated English composer Gerald Finzi" and his not being in the composers' "super league". There was poignancy in the talk: the last letter written to Thorpe-Davie was seven days before Finzi died. Oh, and here is one of Finzi's suggested exam questions for undergraduates: 'Symphony No. 4' – Name eight composers who made one of those.'

The third 'morning' session started in the early afternoon. The world-famous Fitzwilliam String Quartet welcomed guest oboe player James Eastaway and played five pieces, two of which were by Finzi. They had, at short notice, changed their plans because one of their four had a COVID infection. They had no alternative but to drop their plans to play Thorpe Davie's *Phantasy for String Quartet*, and they played only the Epilogue of Vaughan Williams's *String Quartet No. 2*. They added Handel's *Concerto for Oboe and Strings in G major*, and the oboe quintet in which Fenby arranged two interludes from Delius's *Fennimore and Gerda.* There was much interesting mention of Goosens by both Alan George and James Eastaway. They last piece they played was Finzi's *Interlude, for Oboe and String Quartet* (op. 21), which gave we Finzi devotees and the neophytes more of the wistful and saudade-spiced signatures that we had enjoyed in their first piece, the *Prelude for Strings*, which, as we agreed at the beginning, was gorgeous.

The afternoon session (which I didn't attend) afforded community and student string players the opportunity to work with the members of the Fitzwilliam String Quartet on repertoire performed by Finzi with his Newbury String players.

Ian Deary OBE, FBA, FRSE, FMedSci
Professorial Fellow, Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh

*This is a tenuous similarity I have with Finzi: I was an external examiner at the University of St Andrews, though in the Department of Psychology, and about 40 years after Finzi. I am not a musical scholar, just a Finzi fan and a decades-long *Finzi Friend*. I appeal for readers' understanding in my writing outwith my field; I thank Dr Michael Downes for helpful comments.

DIES NATALIS

Reclaiming the territory?

By Holly Teague

Holly Teague is a Shropshire-born soprano who studied at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, the Royal College of Music, and Paris Conservatoire (CNSMD). She is a versatile musician who has performed in many genres, including recent appearances with Garsington Opera as an Alvarez Artist, with Scottish Opera and Cumbria Opera, and many concert and chamber music appearances. She has a keen interest in English Song. Holly regularly partners with guitarist Michael Matthews. In the autumn of 2022, they presented Martin Bussey's new song cycle, *A Shropshire Lass*, a forty-five-minute, semi-staged piece inspired by the words of Shropshire novelist and poet, Mary Webb. Hearing that Holly is to sing *Dies Natalis* in November 2023, Martin Bussey took the opportunity to ask her about preparing for this work which is so loved by Finzi enthusiasts. Of course, for many the work is associated with tenor Wilfred Brown, thanks to his memorable recording with Kiffer Finzi. Though it was first sung by Elsie Suddaby…

Do you sing much music by English composers?

I am a huge supporter of English song repertoire, both listening to it and of course performing it! As a native, I suppose a lot of the musical and narrative themes feel like 'being at home', as well as being accessible

to, if not already known and loved by an audience. I also really enjoy the study of musical languages and identity created by composers in song repertoire, which is particularly prevalent in the English tradition. It gives me an additional level or perception of intention in my performances, and really helps to inform me about what I need to communicate to an audience. Finzi is no exception to this, and working on *Dies Natalis* has felt like unlocking a secret code into his understanding of Traherne's amazing poetry.

Can you pick out some features of Finzi's music that you find appealing?

We had an excellent English Song class during my undergraduate degree. I remember a particularly ironic session during my first year where we sang Finzi settings side by side with (dare I say it!) Britten settings of the same poems. The aural comparison in this format was stark, to say the least! Whilst I am a huge fan of Britten, I find Finzi's approach to Hardy's poetry the one that is truly moving. It feels clear to me that both men were searching for a way to navigate a world in which philosophy and science were forced to change very quickly. As a performer, Finzi's declamatory style in song setting (found here in *Dies Natalis* and in many of Finzi's Hardy settings) is particularly attractive: somehow the singer is presented as the protagonist around which everything harmonically moves in 'real time'. It's very theatrical, without adding any sort of physical theatre.

How do you approach preparation of a work like *Dies Natalis*? In particular, how do you approach a text as distinctive as Traherne's?

Traherne's words are nothing short of wondrous! I learned them without music initially; I often do this because it's a good way of finding the places where my ideas may (or may not) align with the composer's… and then make them do so! I find the accompaniment of *Dies Natalis* rather like a moving landscape, or pictures that melt into each other around the vocal line, so I spent some time working out exactly what I believe those visuals to be so. That enables me to relax into the melody and allow the story to progress naturally, rather than directing or narrating it.

I've also found it very useful to listen to recordings, the earliest being the fateful Decca/British Council album with Joan Cross. Reportedly, neither composer nor singer felt satisfied with the output, but Finzi himself was present, so it's a fantastic source for shape and tempo, if nothing else! Following the reading I have done, I think it could well be that the second movement (Rhapsody) was conducted by Finzi in the absence of Boyd Neel. Regardless, I do wonder why the second movement appears to be up a semi-tone: the segue from the Intrada feels incredibly jarring! [See the accounts of the impact of snow and issues around power supply in both Stephen Banfield and Diana McVeagh's biographies! Ed.] I can't imagine it went down well! Likewise, the third movement feels almost uncomfortably fast, but gives an excellent fanfare-like quality that I very much hope to adopt in our performance. There are lots of singers who prefer not to listen to other people's interpretations of works until they're settled in their own, but I personally find it very helpful to listen and decide what I believe works successfully, particularly when recordings have a direct link to the composer.

Do you feel Finzi reflects the text in any particular ways in which he writes for the voice?

There is certainly acknowledgement of the metaphysical preference of spoken word over lyricism in this piece. The setting is entirely syllabic, and the accompaniment moves sweepingly, painting a scene or a feeling of the words that follow. As such, at times it feels rather like reciting a well-pitched monologue! The legato required however, is still very easy to achieve as the breath moves very naturally with the rhythm of the text.

Much of Finzi's output is sung by male voices - do you have a view on that?

Finzi definitely favoured the male voice as a vehicle for expressing text. However, I don't think that this is necessarily exclusive to Finzi; many male composers of the time were inclined to set the words of male poets and quite naturally envisage a male singer as a result. That being said, *Dies Natalis* was of course itself initially written for a soprano, Elsie Suddaby, before becoming popular with the boys!

Do you feel it's time to get *Dies Natalis* back from the tenors?

An excellent question! When researching, I really have found it frustrating that so many praise its success as a piece for tenor over soprano! In my (very biased) opinion, regardless of voice type, the vocal line requires a lot of warmth to truly serve the text. Whilst the poems are full of imagery of the divine, this is given from an extremely human perspective, and I wonder whether the silvery quality that is often associated with higher-set sopranos presents the words more "ethereally", and therefore loses gravity of meaning to the listener an octave lower. In my opinion, there really are merits to both. I am definitely from the school of thinking that if someone feels they have a reason to sing, they must!

Do you feel there are features which will come across differently when the soloist is a soprano? I heard it sung by Elizabeth Watts last year (Three Choirs, Hereford) and noticed it was very different in the way the soloist frequently sang over the top of the string texture rather than within it, for example.

I think the biggest difference for the listener will be the effect at the top of the voice. Finzi demands every possible dynamic and shape above the stave, and whilst we do all have access, the technical requirements are certainly easier for a female voice.

When you're performing, how do you seek to achieve a bond with your audience and enhance their understanding of the piece you're singing?

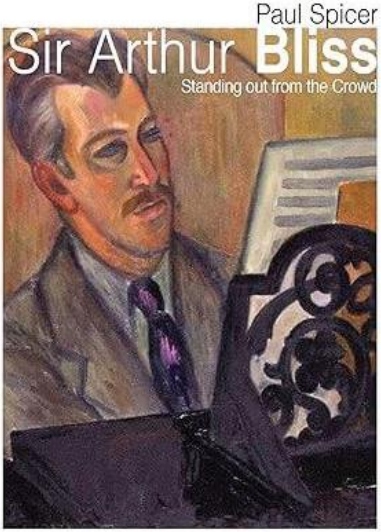
The ideas presented by both composer and poet in *Dies Natalis* are so much bigger than anything you might find on an opera stage! It's impossible to know what an audience might expect or want from a performance of a work of this kind, but I believe that is the ambiguity in the narration of this work that allows us all to relate to it and makes the piece so special. At the end of what has been a difficult year for many, I have found the process of singing this wonderful music welcome solace from the headlines and worries of day-to-day life. I hope that I am able to share even a little of that tranquility with the audience on the 24th of November.

BOOK REVIEW

SIR ARTHUR BLISS
STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

By Paul Spicer

Review by Martin Bussey



Paperback, Published by The Crowood Press, June 2023
384 pages, including appendices and index.
With colour and black & white illustrations
ISBN: 978-0-7198-1633-8

This is a welcome account of a composer who somehow seems to stand outside the typical 'British composer' circle and yet was Master of the Queen's Musick. And, perhaps a critical accolade, was invited onto Desert Island discs twice! Paul Spicer, a trustee of the Finzi Trust and former Chairman of the *Friends* has wide knowledge of the British music of the twentieth century. His books on Howells and Dyson have contributed much to the literature of that area.

The book proceeds as a chronological account. Its emphasis is on biography, with accounts of the music Bliss was writing at any point running alongside accounts of his relationships; his musical work outside his own compositions, which was extensive; his travels; and, crucially, his writings in his diary and autobiography. The initial panorama of early influences perhaps sometimes moves too swiftly, giving an account of a breathtaking array of characters. Partly this is due to the range of experiences to which Bliss opened himself. This is emphasised by the focus on Whitman at the start of the second chapter. Occasionally some of the judgements given on other composers, artists or works might be eschewed in favour of keeping the focus on Bliss. For example, a diversion towards Vaughan Williams' setting of Whitman's 'Beat, beat drums' doesn't seem to have specific relevance to Bliss. However, some passages, such as the quote from Howells' letter to Bliss about his and Bliss' aesthetic and prodigality of ideas are jewels of insight.

Readers will decide for themselves whether Spicer's 'detective novel' approach to uncovering Bliss and his music is congenial, together with the linked stylistic decision to try and draw in the reader through continual use of 'we' in the narrative. The approach does enable recurring themes to be woven into the book's textures. The focus on the impact on Bliss of visual more than literary stimuli is developed skilfully and leads to a growing understanding of the background to works such as the Colour Symphony. The book also looks in detail at the stimulation Bliss derived from watching artists or sculptors (at the highest level) at work in their studios.

Contrast between Teutonic musical influences and the impact of the innovative Russian approach in the 1910s is fascinatingly documented, first through Bliss' lecture of 1921 and later, in the third chapter, whose title references the impact of Diaghilev. The apparent conflict between the

views Bliss expressed in the lecture and his earlier allegiance to Beethoven would be an interesting strand to develop further. What is exciting is the realisation of Bliss that, after Stravinsky's ballets, the challenge for composers was to match Stravinsky's emphasis on originality. Spicer addresses this challenge kindly with reference to Holst and Delius but he is more persuasive in claiming that it is Vaughan Williams who successfully meets the challenge by taking a different path. Meeting the challenge of *The Rite of Spring* is not a case of 'either/or' following Stravinsky but it's certainly the case that too many British composers (including too many today) write as if that work had never been written. That charge could not be laid at the door of Bliss. (We now know from Diana McVeagh's Finzi letters volume that this challenge was one Finzi and Ferguson also relished encountering).

Another significant strand in the book is the exploration of the relationship between Bliss' music and the expression of emotion. It shows that, particularly in the 1930s, Bliss was developing an approach to this relationship and, maybe, moving on from the slightly brittle approach of his writing immediately after World War One. The composer's view of the desirable relationship between music and emotion is clearly laid out in his Royal Institution lectures of 1934, from which significant extracts appear in Chapter 7.

What comes across as a heavy blow to appreciation of Bliss' development in the 1920s is the loss of so many scores of his music during this vital period in his development. Spicer gives a clear and detailed account of these different works, making the inability to hear them doubly frustrating. His research into contemporary criticism of Bliss is pure gold: the account of H.E.Wortham's article in the charmingly named *The Sackbut* is vital evidence of how Bliss was viewed in this period.

Very significant is the generous provision of extracts from Bliss' own reflections, memories and writings. These speak for themselves so clearly that commentary is superfluous and the way these excerpts are presented is a strength of the book. This comes across particularly clearly in the diary entries relating to his wartime experiences. Complementary to these insights and contemporary with them is a telling view of Elgar recorded in a letter to Herbert Howells. It is examples such as this, spread

throughout the book, which are of immeasurable value, in this case because the dichotomy of views Bliss admits to could so easily have been common to many musicians of his age.

The very sparing use of musical examples is disappointing as there are places where their inclusion may well have removed the need for descriptions of notation. The book would have benefitted from tighter editing: there are several occasions when, reading a paragraph, there is a sense that one has read something before. For example, Bliss' description of Robert Nichols as 'Quixotic' in his diary appears, more or less word for word, in both Chapters 2 and 6. Similarly, his negative comments on the first performance of *The Olympians*, which appear quite rightly in Chapter 11 where the opera is discussed, are repeated with similar exactness in the final chapter.

The book considers Bliss often within a British context, inevitably at the start when World War One limited opportunities to go abroad. As already stated, the accounts of the composer's relationship with Elgar are of interest, though the book falls too easily too often into a caricature of Stanford as a disgruntled relic from the past. It would have been interesting to read more comparison of the work of Bliss with non-British contemporaries who inhabited different artistic environments, such as Bartok. The account of the composition, and first performance of *Checkmate* in Paris, and the many performances of music in the United States do later take the reader outside the narrow confines of mid-twentieth century British music. It shows a British composer working in a truly international (not just Germanic) context. As Spicer indicates in a quote from Bliss, *Checkmate* 'has danced itself around the world'. Spicer observes acutely that, while the ballet, with its modernism, retained its place in continental ballet companies, it was dropped from the repertoire of the then Vic-Wells ballet company in London. This begins to demonstrate the aspect of Bliss as being outside the customary 'canon' of British composers. But also emphasises that this is distinctive and often positive. Possibly this is linked to his awareness and openness to wider influences and styles. This is underlined in the next chapter by the account of the positive reception of the Piano Concerto in the United States in connection with the World Fair. Vaughan Williams was of course also the recipient of a commissioned premiere as part of that event, but that Bliss

should be so well received is significant, given his US connections, and also indicative of objective appreciation of his music.

Insights into Bliss' approach to composition present many interesting avenues for further exploration. On the larger scale, his openness to collaboration is evident throughout the book, particularly in his film and ballet work. His readiness and, at times, need to receive stimulus from other creative artists' ideas gives a positive picture of Bliss as someone for whom the act of composition is an all-embracing one, where this is relevant to the work that is conceived. This is interesting to compare with contemporaries of his such as Britten for whom collaboration could be a thorny path, usually more for the collaborator than for the composer. It is sad, therefore that two of the most interesting collaborations, with J.B. Priestley on the opera *The Olympians*, and with Christopher Hassall on *The Beatitudes*, should have ended in disappointing premieres, to say the least. The treatment of Bliss at Coventry, where the premiere of a work associated with the new Cathedral was shunted into a theatre (because of the time needed for rehearsal of Britten's *War Requiem*) appears scandalous. Spicer presents this with appropriate sympathy. The episode again brings into focus consideration of where Bliss was seen to sit in the broader British musical hierarchy (often one strongly influenced by the BBC). There is an apparent inconsistency between that hierarchy and royal musical appointments in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, such as the appointment of Bliss as Master of the Queen's Musick.

On the smallest scale, Spicer chooses with a practised eye accounts from the writings of those who knew Bliss. The description by Julia Harland of the rapid speed and beauty with which Bliss wrote when composing is interesting when set against contemporaries. For example, compared with accounts of composition in the recent televised biography of Tippett, where that composer described an agonising process which might result in two or three notes from a day's work.

A particular strength is Spicer's ability to spot and commend some of the strongest and most attractive moments in the extensive extant music of Bliss. This is invaluable as a guide to the listener. For example, the Clarinet Quintet or individual movements such as the slow movement of the Piano Concerto, which is indeed powerful in its connection with an

emotional core, as the book describes. These commendations are particularly valuable in the context of the works Bliss wrote without a stated programme. They do Bliss good service in pointing readers to useful introductions to listening to his work.

A constant theme throughout the book is the frequent need that Bliss acknowledged for some starting point or 'donée' in his creative activity. Though sometimes the book is rather subjective in imagining possible starting points for some works, more often clear, objective links are made to starting points which are confirmed by the writings of Bliss himself. These are particularly helpful when starting out in listening to the non-programmatic music. This is true even when the information that Bliss gives is that a starting point is simply a desire to write 'pure music' after writing film or ballet music, as in the case of the *Music for Strings* (recently recorded in a fine, advocatory performance by John Wilson's Sinfonia of London and well worth exploring). Even here, where Bliss was choosing to write the piece as a contrast to his preceding 'programmatic' work on the film *Things to Come*, he ended up referencing the artwork of Klee when discussing the opening idea.

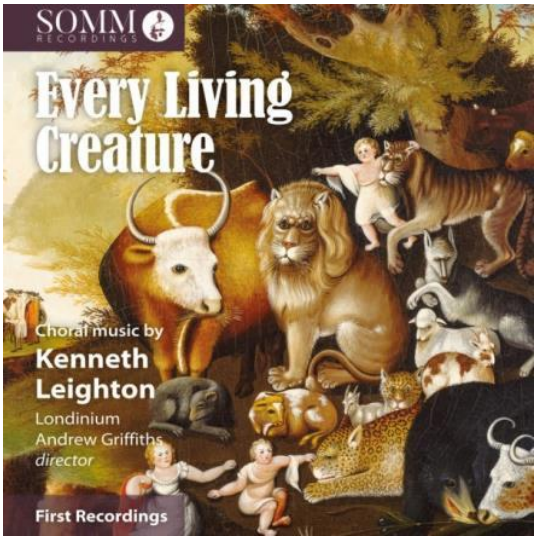
There are some aspects of Bliss' musical life to which the reader might wish the book had given more time and provided more considered judgements. The combination in Bliss of a creative artist and an administrator is one that the composer himself acknowledged to be natural. In Chapter 11, Spicer quotes Bliss writing about his perceived need to do some form of administrative work, inherited from his father's experience in business. Certainly, Bliss was highly active as figure in various organisations at different times, including the BBC and British Council. The accounts of his visits to Russia with government backing are vivid and, again, indicative of him as an international figure. Spicer gives no definitive judgement as to the impact of all this on Bliss as a creative artist and it would have been interesting to hear the author's view on whether this area was ultimately a distraction for the composer. In the later chapters of the book, although Bliss continued to compose busily in response to commissions there lurks a sense of an artist riding two horses at once, one creative and one administrative. But it's good to be able to take away and ponder such questions from a book which has answered a long-term need.

CD REVIEW

EVERY LIVING CREATURE

Choral music by Kenneth Leighton

Review by Tom Coxhead



Released May 2023. Somm Recordings. SOMMCD 0667
Sung by Londinium; Director Andrew Griffiths

Andrew Griffiths presents lesser-known unaccompanied choral works by the mid-twentieth century British composer, Kenneth Leighton, sung by Londinium. This is the choir's second recording and, having been

delayed by the pandemic, is much anticipated. For those who know Leighton's church music, there is something fresh here and while the music is evidently Leighton's handiwork possibly something quite unfamiliar from the usual touchstones of his sacred music that have been previously recorded.

Londinium is one of London's premier non-professional chamber choirs (although with nearly 50 singers on this disc, necessary for some of the repertoire presented, it feels more akin to a radio choir) with a sound that is fresh and a real ability to give an emotionally convincing performance that is technically assured. This disc convincingly advocates the music being performed. The focus of the recording is Leighton's unpublished *Laudes animantium* (Op.61) which Griffiths identified along with other unpublished or unjustly neglected works. He has managed to create a wonderfully balanced portrait of the composer across the greater part of his life. Discs of a single composer can be a mixed blessing, but the programming finds the light and shade of the music with Griffiths' excellent direction highlighting this through the group's well-communicated and tight performance.

Laudes animantium is an example of Leighton's life-long interest in nature as a topic for his music, (ranging from his student *Veris gratia* suite dedicated to Finzi to the monumental song cycle *Earth, sweet earth*) and Londinium capture the tone and character required for this multi-faceted work. They are joined by soloists Nick Pritchard (tenor), Rebecca Lea (soprano), Nina Bennet (soprano), Ciara Hendrick (mezzo-soprano), and Finchley Children's Music Group. The *Prelude* is one of the first pieces in which Leighton introduces a work with a soloist singing prose-like (i.e. unmetered) text – a device which he uses in his Symphony No.3 *Laudes musicae* and *Earth, sweet earth* – and this is done with consummate skill by tenor, Nick Pritchard, to a text from Whitman's 'A song of myself'. The duet in *The Nightingale* between him and Rebecca Lea is performed with space and apparent ease.

From the witty *Scherzo: Calico Pie* and *The Grey Squirrel* to the dread and wailing of *The Kraken,* there is none of the embarrassed English choir-stalls emotional restraint here: the ensemble sounds really committed to both the text and Leighton's response to it – both serious and humorous. They do no injustice to those sections which are simply

beautiful either: *The Lamb* deserves a particular mention for the two superb soloists from Finchley Children's Music Group. Arielle Loewinger and Madelaine Napier possess two mature and clear voices which are well matched to each other, playing on Leighton's musical mirror-image of their melodies. The text naturally invites thoughts of John Tavener's famous setting, but it seems Leighton achieved something of the same emotional material and compositional quality over a decade before Tavener wrote his.

Suitably enough for a choir named Londinium, *London Town* is another secular cantata – this time a single movement where Leighton's capacity for creating energy through his counterpoint is in full flow. The usual hallmarks of spiky rhythms and his modally influenced tonal language are evident. There are more secular pieces of these sort that really would make great additions to the repertoire for concerts choirs of a fairly decent standard. While the effect of much of Leighton's music sounds hard, the quality of his writing for each part makes these works innately singable – the proof of that is the vim that Londinium injects into this performance.

My personal highlight bridges between the secular and sacred spaces, with the immense setting of Thomas Browne's *An Evening Hymn*. Religious but not liturgical, it is immediately apparent as a masterpiece but no small challenge, which Londinium and Rebecca Lea as soprano soloist meet with ease. The richer textures and slower harmonic tempo make for something quite sumptuous – almost sensual. Leighton seems to treat the choir as a string orchestra, and the unusual divisi in the final few minutes achieves an astonishing sonority. It is hard to believe that such a work, with up to nine parts at one point, was written for and first performed by just the choir of Chichester Cathedral (a tiny choral foundation of just 12 boys and 6 men at the time) as the dedication reads, commissioned for the 1979 Chichester Festival. It certainly suits a larger choir. One might feel that the work of only two years earlier would be in the same vein, but there is a much more angular quality to *Lord, when the sense of thy sweet grace*, and it is arguably the hardest piece to listen to in the programme. The harmony is piquant, but the gentle sway of the slow three-time metre is an effect that Leighton clearly wanted to cultivate for the cavernous acoustic of Ampleforth Abbey, for where he wrote the piece on New Year's Day, dedicating it to the Schola Cantorum. Further pieces for

Ampleforth would follow with a motet for boys' voices and a mass setting a few years later.

In contrast to these later works we also hear the youthful Leighton with the very first choral compositions he penned. The *Lully, lulla* is well-known and was published in 1956 as part of Leighton's Opus 25, but here it is presented for the first time with its two unpublished companions from 1948, written when Leighton was only 19. These simple but beautiful pieces work incredibly well on this disc, and the soloists taken from Londinium do a fantastic job – so much so that there is no sense at all of these being a step down from the main soloists on the recording. It is also interesting to compare this early set of pieces with the later *Nativitie*, written after Leighton had studied with Goffredo Petrassi in Rome, and had taken up his first position at Edinburgh University. The starkness of that work's opening, with its expansive phrases setting John Donne's text is of an entirely different scale to the 1948 works. The mood begins to thaw with the entry of the soprano solo, and the whole piece yields from iciness to something much more tender.

A Hymn to the Trinity demonstrates perhaps the character of Leighton with which people are most familiar, but even amidst the lively dance rhythms and intricate sections of counterpoint, the soft moments are equally wonderful. This feels like a good party piece to end the programme and again Londinium manage to give that sense of a live performance which characterises the whole disc.

Griffiths' liner notes are excellent, achieving a good balance between Leighton's biographical information and highlighting salient points which illuminate his programming. These alone justify purchasing a physical copy of the disc, although it is available to stream online. The only niggle is the listing of Leighton's setting of the Coventry Carol (*Lully lulla, thou little tiny child*) which gives 'tiny little' instead, which is a shame for the one work listeners are likely to know of beforehand.

If there are any faults for me they are only small details. Some diphthongs seem to not happen or do not tell on the recording, nor am I entirely convinced that the acoustic of All Hallows in Gospel Oak is universally successful. Sometimes there is too much of the building to really hear the detail of what is going on - this is particular true for the

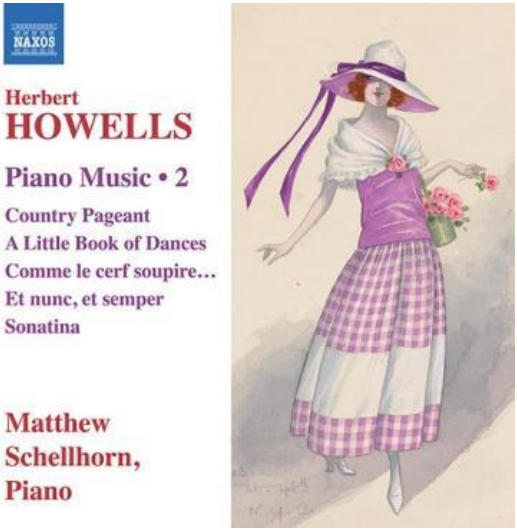
lower voices. It does however give that incredibly satisfying ambience to the smaller and intimate carols. In all, a really fine disc with fantastic singing. The tuning is spot-on to my ear and I am thrilled that Griffiths and Londinium have achieved such an excellent aural advocacy for Kenneth Leighton with this innovative programme. It should get the juices of any choir director going or there's something wrong with them!

Tom Coxhead is a freelance choral conductor and organist based in London. He has just completed his MMus at the Royal Academy on the Choral conducting course. He is active as a teacher and is Director of Music at Christ Church, East Sheen.

CD REVIEW

HOWELLS PIANO MUSIC VOL 2

Review by Matthew Pope



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Matthew Schellhorn, Piano

Herbert Howells' choral works refracted the light of Anglican sacred music and paved the way for the likes of Leighton to keep the door to spiritual doubt ajar in that tradition. His music for solo piano is, however, hardly known. This does not necessarily point to his relative deficiency in the medium so much as it demonstrates how we, perhaps

unfairly, measure him by his choral output alone. Matthew Schellhorn gives us an opportunity to reckon whether we have been right in doing so.

While there is indeed much on this disc to enjoy and to reckon with, it serves also as a useful survey of Howells' maturation in the medium. The works are more or less chronologically ordered; Howells wrote the 'The Arab Song' in 1908, and the last work on the album, his Sonatina, was published in 1971. Naturally, not all of this music bears the stamp of the 'Howells style' that we know from the sacred music he composed later in life. Nevertheless, not only is it interesting to find the pieces which one could easily guess are his, it is satisfying to find in his earlier works both the influence of other composers - Brahms, Elgar, Fauré among others - as well as forays into a language that Howells had yet to fully develop. At any rate, the question is not whether Howells' choral writing outshines that of his work for the keyboard: it does. Rather, the question is whether his piano works are in any event worth hearing. Whatever the answer, this disc at the very least shows that Schellhorn is, after Margaret Fingerhut before him, the one to make the case that it is.

The album opens with 'Comme le cerf soupire', which translates as 'Like the deer sighs', whose old French melody sounds as though it might have been adapted from a Kyrie chant. If Schellhorn meant to demonstrate from the outset the piano's ability to sing on a single line, he has here succeeded. (If you are new to Schellhorn's playing, this introduction doubles - possibly unintentionally - as a note-by-note preview of his style at its barest. See for yourself but, for now, sinuous will do as an adjective.) With the melody's return, Howells begins to add layers to the texture as though illuminating more of the space in which he situates us: cold and dim with the widely spaced F# minor chord, like a monk's cell, or a long-abandoned drawing room of a grand house. Once Schellhorn finds a darling Bb first inversion sus chord - proving that composers employed it long before Lauridsen (while depending on it less!) - we are attached to the memory of the place and are musically hooked. As things progress, our sense of the music's history deepens until the second iteration of this melody ceases. The third brings tension and new demands: rising and falling cascades cross themselves repeatedly and unapologetically. This culminates in a kind of paralysis whereby Howells pins us with a half-diminished chord revoiced around the melody note, the bell-like Bb that strikes two octaves above the pedal octave As. It hangs in

the air like a stalactite before Howells unclenches his grip and grants or finds some grim courage to reprieve us from this - presumably his - reckoning. The melody's return is bloodied but there is a final sense of all having been borne, and it having been better, or necessary, to have borne it, even if to no ultimate avail.

Schellhorn executes the character of each note and chord with painstaking clarity. His interpretative decisions, both instinctive and premeditated, testify to the king of American song Thomas Hampson's statement: 'There is no limit to how hard you must work and how detailed you must be in every facet of what you do.' Howells was, like Elgar and Britten, a composer who left no detail to chance, though Schellhorn's license is welcome.

'Comme le cerf soupire' is the exception to an otherwise unbroken order of works composed first to last in Howells' life. After it on the disc comes 'The Arab's Song', which Howells penned on his sixteenth birthday. In hindsight, it is endearingly clear how talented the young Howells was: even here within a fairly square and familiar harmonic structure, Howells shows flair as well as an impatience for cliché with his mixing of two and three time in the left-hand, a preparation for the subsequent mazurka section.

One clear advantage of Howells' piano writing is that it offers a glimpse of his playful side. Much of the album consists of characterful miniatures and shorter pieces. A personal favourite is 'Melody', which may or may not owe something to Manuel de Falla. 'The Sailor's Tune' is good fun, as is the spirited and well-captured 'Promenade for Boys'. On the heroic end is the relatively well known 'The Chosen Tune'. As the one crossover from this disc with Margaret Fingerhut's, it's worth dipping into to compare the two approaches. Both performances are first-rate: Schellhorn's makes Fingerhut's sound more by-the-book; her pacing is faster and more even, and she rolls assuredly into the climax. His is the more romantic of the two; each is worth hearing but he finds more in the tune to cherish.

The Country Pageant is a collection of four tunes which Howells wrote in his middle age. When they are jaunty ('Merry Andrew's Procession', 'The Mummers' Dance') they sound a little like grade six

exam pieces, though at the time they may have come across as less ABRSM and more like the expressions of a charming or lost parochialism that they are. Later in the disc comes the 'Minuet for Ursula' that Howells composed for his daughter. Though also a kind of study - Howells meant for it to encourage Ursula at the piano - it is pretty and has in it a kind of naive symmetry. The third and by far the most mellifluous in the Pageant set is, 'There Was a Most Beautiful Lady', which starts well but grows tediously pentatonic, maybe even a little diffuse. There are, however, foreshadowings of the sort of chords that Howells would use forty years later in his choral masterpiece, 'Take Him Earth For Cherishing'. (I would add that, by this point, it seems apparent that Richard Rodney Bennett in his piano writing owes something to the older composer.)

The Little Book of Dances consciously takes inspiration, as has been said elsewhere, from the 16th century. 'Minuet' is pretty, but the 'Pavane' stands out from the other five. Schellhorn exerts a French level of control over suspended notes. In particular, his touch on the low F# through the first and recurring descending passage is exquisite: in a miniature that is otherwise mannered it is a betrayal of something warmer, like a look of concupiscence from under an intricate coiffure.

And so the record rolls on through various ditties, one of which, the 'Promenade for Girls' has a tune that takes a little after Debussy's 'The Little Shepherd' from Children's Corner, but isn't as good. The 'Promenade' demonstrates the extent to which soft-edged and meandering, or otherwise rootless patterns can go too far: relentlessly Lydian melodies that start winsome are in danger of ending up tiresome.

Not so with the 'Et nunc et semper', which comes near the end. This is a return to the spiritual seriousness of 'Comme le cerf soupire' with added mysticism. There is, here, also a struggle, but we don't reach the climax or apparent epiphany in the eye of its storm of minor ninths, and the afterglow is other than what we expect. At first, letting us rest in safer harmonic territory, Howells provides a balm for the one he has just stretched and torn, as if his thoughts themselves were despairing and straining at their own fabric. However, what follows is something that is more than a release of tension. It is a gnomic discovery at once clear and inscrutable. Listening, we feel like an explorer who, having gained the treasure hoard, slips into a smaller chamber enclosing a sealed mystery

which once disclosed will be known only by personal report. This is not the final expression of an ardent feeling, but a quieter and less certain revelation: as Indiana Jones has it: 'the cup of a carpenter', 'et nunc et semper'. Whether or not Schellhorn feels likewise, he neither hastens to the secret before we're ready, nor does he delay it for his own indulgence; it is as though we find it with him.

Schellhorn makes his case well. There are some works on this disc for which two or three listens are more than enough; others may stand without shame next to pieces far better known in the piano repertory. The takeaway is that Howells was not a choral composer writing for keyboard. Rather, he was a composer who wrote through the mediums at his disposal in order to express whatever he needed to – whether as a boy flexing his early abilities, or a father fondly nudging his daughter toward the piano stool, or a parent forever thrown into grief and doubt after the loss of his son Michael. After hearing his piano music, and in particular these performances of it, one only finds more that is admirable in the composer, and likeable in the man.

Matthew Pope graduated in music from the University of Manchester. He then undertook post-graduate study at Goldsmith's College, London. He is a Lay-Clerk of Christ Church, Oxford.