

GERALD FINZI – SECOND THOUGHTS : A COMPOSER’S VIEW

Although he has sometimes been perceived as a composer who rather preferred to keep to himself – he certainly had a mistrust of what we would now call the ‘scene’ – Gerald Finzi was actually well in step, if not in sympathy, with the times he lived in: informed, curious, and trenchant in his opinions - (The ‘Walking Manchester Guardian’).

He was also genuinely interested in the music of other composers. Not all composers are: for instance, Delius, who in his declining years, as Eric Fenby reports, had constantly to be drip-fed ‘Delius’. Gerald, on the other hand, would take endless pains when he could to encourage others, both practically - through performance with the Newbury Strings, say - as well as morally. (This, in notorious contrast with the mean-spirited attitude of Benjamin Britten). I am one of the many beneficiaries of his good will – and at this late stage in my life I am in a position to recognize and cherish the seam running through. But I should make clear that my connection with him as a young composer – I was only sixteen in 1950 when I first came across the Finzis’ – was very slender : I had scarcely begun, and his time was running short.

I don’t think I ever had the occasion to formally show my efforts to him, in a ‘one-to-one situation’. As far as I can remember, I used to bash stuff through on the piano in the sitting-room – with the rest of the family hanging about – and he would make the odd comment. I never got to enjoy the sustained regime which Tony Scott describes so vividly in his memoir ; and I was nowhere near so accomplished and productive as the young Kenneth Leighton, whose recollections I also urge people to open up on the geraldfinzi.org website. There you will discover Finzi’s ‘method’ – he, who had such mistrust and loathing for academe : as he said to Tony, ‘These sessions are to be as one composer to another : I look at the music you show me and I put in a stick here, suggest a path there, just to guide you, a handrail to steady you’. And I realize, after a lifetime working with other composers – first at Morley College, and then for many years at the Royal College of Music – that these have been my precepts, always.

I don’t need to point out that coming across Gerald Finzi as I did, carried with it the ‘whole package’ : I mean the family, Joy and Kiffer and Nigel ; also Ashmansworth ; and a whole radiating tissue of connections and co-incidences. I have written elsewhere of the impact that first encounter had upon me. Tony also in his Memoir speaks of the ‘Arcadian way of life’ he found there ; and from a perspective of fifty years it has acquired a kind of nimbus, warm and hazy - not unlike Samuel Palmer’s Shoreham Valley. But that was only disclosed to me somewhat later.

I first encountered the Finzis’ in the hurley-burley of a rather racketsy summer school at Cowley Manor near Cheltenham. (Now a 5 star de luxe hotel, boasting Elizabeth Hurley as one of its regulars). I am a West Country man, and my godmother, Diana Oldridge – a remarkable woman who had run the Stinchcombe Festival before the war, emulating Vaughan Williams’s Leith Hill Festival, and who knew everybody – Holst, VW, Howells, Robin Milford, as well as Finzi – had urged me to go along, hoping that it might help to prise me from my shell. I came from a rather conventional background ; and although I was encouraged by my family I had no musical companions ; and as a pianist (quite promising) who dabbled in composing (couldn’t stop, really) I needed to stretch myself a bit. They were all there : Kiffer and Nigel, Shush (Richard Shirley Smith), and the Scotts, Caroline and Johnny – it sounds like Enid Blighton, but it was actually more like the Lord of the Flies. Total anarchy in the dorm.

At the end of the two weeks or so, Joy and Gerald made an appearance, to retrieve their children : it was the run-up to the Three Choirs Festival at Gloucester – that *annus mirabilis* which saw the premieres of Howells's 'Hymnus Paradisi' as well as Gerald's 'Intimations'. It was my first glimpse of them, and I remember being somewhat overawed when I was introduced – Joy so tall, and kind of vague and bemused by all the turmoil, and Gerald an energetic bundle beside her – the first COMPOSER I'd ever seen.

That summer in Gloucester – forever milling about the Close with my new friends; the excitement of attending rehearsals; all this whole new world of music spread out before me; and at night, the floodlit cathedral sending its mysterious shadow into the sky like the northern lights ; the little parties Alice Sumsion used to arrange after the concerts – remains one of the most potent memories of my life : the moment when I finally grasped the key to wherever it was I was destined to go.

And the people ! Many of the gentlemen still wore morning dress, and the ladies rigged out in hats and gowns. "There's Mrs. Elgar Blake!", someone would say, as a rather nondescript woman passed; and the jostling parade of some of the great names in the 'English Renaissance': Ivor Atkins and Sir Percy Hull, with their 3 Choirs connection; Boris Ord of Kings. And of course RVW, the presiding spirit of the place, who was down to conduct the 'Pastoral Symphony'. Hurrying round a corner with my godmother to catch the morning rehearsal of 'Intimations', we bumped smack into Herbert Howells – a dapper little man, carrying a huge music-case (the huge full score of 'Hymnus'), also scurrying somewhere, like the doormouse in Alice in Wonderland: my first introduction to someone who would later provide my entrée into the Royal College.

Like all 3 Choirs Festivals, musically it was a fairly gluttonous occasion: but for a boy of 16 who had never attended an orchestral concert in his life, it was quite simply intoxicating: and the fumes of that intoxication still hang around. It would be fair to say that on their first appearance 'Intimations' was rather upstaged by 'Hymnus Paradisi': the more sober message and colouring of Finzi's work overshadowed by the blazing luminosity and fervor of the Howells. I was also more seduced by the latter; but in a way, that was not surprising: from childhood my musical taste had been orientated towards French music – Debussy, and especially Ravel; and what Frank Howes called the 'contrapuntal impressionism' of Hymnus Paradisi I found irresistably appealing – quite apart from its searing incandescence.

This is fairly blatantly exposed in the first piece I am going to play, a little motet in eight parts, composed in 1953. It is a setting of the Funeral Sentences: 'I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me: Write, from henceforth blessed are the dead which die in the Lord. Even so saith the spirit: for they rest from their labours'. As many of you will know, Howells included a setting of this text in Hymnus. Mine was written as a kind of appendage to an a capella setting of the requiem mass: it was the best bit, and I threw out the rest.

MUSIC EXAMPLE: JDR - *Motet: I heard a voice* (1953)

I said that my musical taste had tended towards French music: a result of having had a wonderful piano teacher who sniffed out my attraction to that kind of thing, and my disdain for 'Minuets in G'. This is not to deny that English music had ever meant anything to me: I had performed the John Ireland Piano Concerto in my last year at school; and I will never forget the experience (in 1946) of listening to the first broadcast performance of Vaughan Williams 6th Symphony on a tiny radio, sitting in the half light on the side of the bed, in a Betjemanesque seaside boarding house at Ilfracombe. But it is true to say that meeting the Finzis, and all those successive 3 Choirs Festivals – not to say the pressure of my godmother - did bring about an adjustment, if not an indoctrination, which affected my thinking about music for a long while.

Fast-forward to 1952, when I was offered a place at the Royal Academy of Music to study composition. Another indelible memory: on my very first day, walking from Baker Street Underground, past Madame Tussaud's, along Marylebone Road, running straight into Kiffer, lugging his cello – I don't think either of us had been aware that we'd land up at the same dump. The relief of finding a familiar face!

In those days, in many ways, the Academy was a bit of a dump: it prescribed an extremely conventional, parochial, musical education. The aural training was a joke, and the history too; and quite soon Kiffer and I, bored out of our minds by Maurice Cole's atomisation of Berlioz' Symphonie Fantastique, decided to skive off. And maybe our truancy provided some of the most irreplaceable items in our growing up: we careered around the town, running after buses, trying to squash as many things into the day as possible – the art galleries of Bond Street, first sightings of Francis Bacon and Graham Sutherland; endless matinee showings in the Academy Cinema - (I can't remember how many times we went to 'M. Hulot's Holiday'). And - as far as I was concerned - the alarming novelty of nut-rissoles, when Kiffer dragged me to Showen's vegetarian restaurant in Tottenham Court Road.

Quite soon, Kiffer suggested that I should come down to Ashmansworth for the weekend. And so it began. And I came, as a visitor, gradually to know them all: Mags, Joy's sister; the helpers, Olive and Jack; Liddy, one of the refugees from the war years; all the Scotts, the family of Tom Scott, their doctor. And although these may seem peripheral names, they are woven inextricably into the texture of Ashmansworth. I'd like to claim – like Shush (the distinguished artist, Richard Shirley Smith), who also came from a 'professional' background – both our fathers were doctors – and certainly caring and supportive families - that we found in the Finzis' a kind of fostering, and an ambiance, that we were incredibly fortunate to have been drawn into. And for me, just at the right time. Joy, especially – who had, I think, the most perfect taste I have ever encountered - was 'on a mission', as we would say today: to make good what she saw, or felt, was deficient; to provide and enable; to steer in what she felt was the right direction. And I was perfect material: slightly wet, a bit of a dreamer, public-school. I think they all felt I needed to be taken in hand! And so, the Arran sweaters: everyone was wearing Arran sweaters; the slightly prickly Harris tweeds, the colour of manure, that my mother was prevailed upon to order for me; the disgusting protocol of NOT using soap, 'in order to preserve the natural oils of the body'; and the even more disgusting routine of washing ones' hair in olive oil.

But much more important than my obvious infatuation with what appeared to me a wonderfully alternative ‘lifestyle’, was the steadiness of purpose that was instilled into me, by the simple assumption, unspoken but clear, that I was a musician, a composer, and that I did not need to explain myself.

I used to bring down my efforts, and play them through. The first solid work I produced was a song-cycle to words by Denton Welch, which made a wee bit of a stir when it was performed by Norman Tattersall at the SPM in London. Quite co-incidentally, I had been attracted to this writer some time before I came to meet Howard Ferguson, who had also used his words in his ‘Discovery’ set. When I, rather gushingly, enthused about the poetry (and even more the Journals), Gerald said “the product of a diseased mind” – which rather put a damper on things. I think I was aware from the start that the grain of our thinking, and our respective characters, would not always match. He definitely ‘had a thing’ about French music: although he had a lot of respect for Ravel (whom on the other hand, in one of his letters to Howard, he calls ‘a brave little composer’ (sic)), and real love for Fauré, he had little time for Debussy, whom at that time I venerated above all. When, a couple of years later, I came back from my national service with a big song-cycle, on words by Verlaine, de Banville and de Musset, he said “Why on earth do you want to be setting all that French stuff when you’ve got all this great English poetry about you?” Notwithstanding, he was immensely helpful in recruiting for its performance Sophie Wyss – Britten’s muse, before Peter Pears came on the scene – who had performed several times with the Newbury String Players. He obviously felt that there was something slightly toxic in the French strain: when I returned to resume study at the RAM, he became very troubled at the prospect of my going to study with Lennox Berkeley (a Nadia Boulanger pupil): almost as though I need to be protected from the pernicious strain. He suggested instead Alan Bush – which would have been death: a sort of grey communist composer. Why he didn’t suggest Howard Ferguson is odd; but maybe not all that odd...

When I went down to Ashmansworth I used to spend a lot of time bashing through scores: for me the Music Room was a treasure trove – it seemed to have everything, even the Op 11 Piano Pieces of Schoenberg. Gerald used to say – I was quite a good sight-reader – “I wish I could play the piano like you”: decrying what he regarded as limited or ‘unpianistic’ in his own writing for piano. Nonsense, of course! What he was really saying, in code, was: “Mind you don’t fall into the danger of facility and luxuriance”. I was still playing a lot of Ravel, Rachmaninoff and the romantics: but it was Gerald who helped me get over my John Ireland phase – Kiffer and I were having a go at the Cello Sonata: he evidently felt there was something sentimental and lush in the music, almost vulgar: what we would call ‘cheesy’. Certainly when I got to know Gerald’s music more - I used to play and sing the songs in that curious bleating, unreliable way that composers have – I found it quite bracing, almost a reproof: its lack of frills; sparseness and candour; the perfect judgement of sonorities; fastidious, compact, contained, and all the more eloquent and powerful for it. I was faced with a whole new set of values, which affected not only my music, but my taste and whole approach to aesthetics.

I don’t think he held virtuosity in high esteem, regarding it as meretricious, a form of camouflage: maybe this was a part of his prejudice against ‘professionalism’. (Mind you, he could turn a pretty impressive virtuosic caper when he wanted to: the Toccata; even ‘The Ecstasy’ in Dies). Unfortunately, perhaps as a result of starting off as a performer, this was something that always engrossed me: not so much the ‘flash’ factor, but as a game of wit and sorcery. I had written a Rhapsody for the Right hand when as a boy I’d broken my left wrist

in the gym: an obvious crib from Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand! And it has remained a topic of fascination for me: I have been extremely lucky in my career to have been able to collaborate with some tremendous players: I wrote a colossal set of Studies and Variations for piano (Like the Diabelli or the Etudes Symphoniques of Schumann) for Steven Kovacevich called 'Tombeau', in which I was delighted to put my mate through all sorts of hoops. And when years later I wrote a large collection of bagatelles for members of the Arditti Quartet, I had the same fun, making them sound like a sextet, a little Chinese orchestra, a consort of viols, and drums: the art of illusion, seeing just what I could get from the barest minimum.

I was always concerned that the virtuosity should have some kind of integrity: I wasn't just interested in a 'cheap thrill'. So when I came to write my 'Capriccio for Violin and Piano' – the piece in which I'm told – (the composer never knows) – my individual voice began to emerge, I was at pains to contain the bravura and fantasy within a context of quite strict musical thinking. Almost all the material comes from the first page, the little flickering figurations for the violin. I think Howard, who gave the first performance with Yfrah Neeman, was quite happy with the dedication. This recording is of Ralph Holmes with Ronald Lumsden.

MUSIC EXAMPLE: JDR: *Capriccio for Violin and Piano*

From what I've said it might appear that I felt Gerald to be repressive: I certainly needed discipline, but also encouragement – and this he gave me a hundredfold, simply by taking me seriously, caring about my 'mistakes'. And of course it was wonderful for me to stay in a household in which the focus was upon work, 'making', harvest. And then the recreation, all those expeditions: over to Burghclere for the Stanley Spencer murals; driving up to London in the van; a quick dash into the booksellers to pick up a massive order for the bookroom; on to the Leicester Gallery for the Alan Reynolds; high tea in a caf.; then on to the old Stoll Theatre for 'Porgy and Bess', the original American cast, with Cab Calloway as Lucky Dice.

But I shouldn't forget that, while all this was going – and the extra-curricular activities that Kiffer embroiled me in too – I was also being pulled in other directions. My composition teacher at the Academy was William Alwyn, a lovely man, and a very good composer of his kind: late-romantic, a cross between Bax and Walton, at that time chiefly famous for his film-scores. He and his wife welcomed me into their family too; and I was able to see Bill's astounding collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings – top-drawer stuff, bought for a song, long before Andrew Lloyd Webber got his grubby hands on them. In our lessons, it was quite plain that Bill had little time for Vaughan Williams and the 'English School'; so I had my first lessons in diplomacy and keeping my mouth shut.

I saw quite a lot of Howard Ferguson, to whom I had been introduced socially by the Finzis'. I didn't study formally with him; but I used to go up to West Hampstead and have supper – WHAT supper! – and he'd look at my work; and also, eventually, talk about his own. We'd play piano duets – Schubert, Fauré – and he would browse for hours through the keyboard works of Couperin, John Blow, the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book: already the scholar was coming to the fore. And next day I'd trot off to Foyles' or the music-publishers and get the scores for myself: I was so hungry and receptive, I was like blotting paper. At the time I got to know him well, he was just starting on 'Quia Amore Languet', his large-scale choral setting of the mediaeval poem; and I have some marvellous letters, written to me while I was on national service in the Middle East, chronicling how the work was progressing. Needless to say, I started on my own 'mediaeval' oratorio, based on Langland's Piers Plowman, the

text of which Howard and Gerald calculated to last a good nine hours. End of Story. But nothing is wasted: I still have the stream of postcards of the Luttrell Psalter from the BM and the big two volume Skeat edition which Howard sent out to me; and my imagination, my inner life, is still illuminated by what Howard unfolded to me.

When I got back to the Academy after my two years away, my old teacher Bill Alwyn had left, and I ended up going to study with Priaulx Rainier, a remarkable woman of South African extraction, who had studied with Nadia Boulanger, and a passionate admirer of Stravinsky. While sympathetic and perceptive as to what was innate in my makeup, she challenged me on a lot of things: and so the process of ‘leaving the nest’ musically got under way. Her ‘culture’ was quite distinct from that of Ashmansworth: she had a studio in St Ives, was a close friend of Barbara Hepworth; at her rather ghastly parties in Ladbroke Grove you’d often brush up against Michael Tippett or Howard Hodgkin. She also knew Jimmy Ede of Kettle’s Yard very well. All these things rubbed off; and for a while my music was deeply imbued with the filigree and sprung rhythms (and the quartal harmony) of Tippett’s *Midsummer Marriage*.

These features were displayed in another ‘early work’, my *Suite for Flute and Strings*, which I dedicated to ‘My friends, the Finzis’ of Ashmansworth’, and it was performed several times with the Newbury Strings – lastly, and unforgettably, by Hilary de Pré. It is in four movements, each enshrining in turn one of the family – though by the time I had completed the composition, Gerald was dead.

It was a terrible shock to me – as it was to everybody when they heard – when Kiffer rang me one morning to give me the news. We had seen something of the Finzis’ a few months earlier at the Three Choirs; and when they all came over one afternoon for tea, my father observed afterwards how extremely ill Gerald had looked. It was shocking to realize what the family had all been living through: that ever since I had first entered that extraordinary world – which seemed so sunny and bouyant – they had each one been contending with this shadow.

It must therefore have been an ambiguous gift when I had some time earlier presented him with a new song, one of a set of three entitled ‘Beautiful lie the Dead’, each dedicated to one of my mentors (Alwyn, Finzi, and Ferguson). He never heard it sung. I have a very precious memory of another performance: late summer at Ashmansworth: VW and Ursula were staying – he was working hard on his 9th Symphony – and every morning, around four or five am, I’d be woken from my slumbers (I was sleeping on a little truckle bed in the kitchen, among the cats, and all the carboys of mead bubbling away): I’d hear the gentle sound of piano notes trickling down from the room above me, penetrating my sleep, as he searched and padded about, and then went back again. Imagine!

Another house guest was Marion Milford, Robin’s niece, who sometimes sang with the Newbury Strings: she had what used to be called a ‘nice’ soprano voice, slightly brittle. As usual there was quite a lot of music: I think we ran through all Robin’s songs, some Rubbra, and a bit of Howells – and my little songs as well. I have this picture of VW slumped on the settee, with Joy and Ursula on either side of him: saying “Let’s have it again” and then again! And so it went on: he took an interest in my work – didn’t much care for the French song-cycle! – and Ursula in time became one of my very closest friends. (She was my landlady for many years).

Today we are going to hear that song for Gerald sung by Jessica Summers. As you will hear, very obviously beholden to Finzi, it is a setting of a poem by W.H.Davies, 'The Mourners'.

When all your bitter grief is gone,
When anger and rebellion done,
Think then, with your more even breath,
How lovely was the face of death.

Say you remember her sweet face,
The light, the loveliness;
The smile that passed beyond this world,
To rest no more on us:

That, knowing now how Death is loved,
You follow her and stand reproved.

MUSICAL EXAMPLE: JDR: *The Mourners*

I'm going to end by reading from two letters from Gerald: both written in the last year of his life, when he had much more important things to do than bothering himself about a young student composer. So many facets of his character are expressed here – his humour, his deep concern for current affairs, his/their generosity spreading to all members of my family.

April 27.55 (written while I was on National Service in Cyprus)

'I ought to have written to you long ago, even though you will have had a letter from Joy in between. Your Mother sent me the 'Piers Ploughman' text, and though I told her I thought it was much too long, I had meant to write and tell you direct. Blame we Ancients for not being able to get through all the things to be done. Now I see that Howard has done all that needs to be done, though I fancy that even his three and a half hours was a generous estimate on his part. Even Mahler and Bruckner get a bit exhausting after the first hour and a half! But I think it was brave of you to tackle such an enormous job, and I hope something comes out of the smaller conception.

I'll put your letter to Kiffer on one side till we visit him. I'm afraid it can't be forwarded as he is only allowed one letter in and out a fortnight. He was first at Oxford for a week or so, and then via Brixton and Wormwood Scrubbs he got to Lewes Jail. Lewes is the prison for under twenty-ones, as it is supposed to be bad for young people to be with old offenders, though why it should be supposed that the under twenty-ones are less corrupting I can't imagine. However, Kiffer's strong character will stand up to all that, though he is finding it pretty horrifying, and you mustn't think he has chosen an easy way out.

Even though he is like to to be left alone after his three months, the months of suspense beforehand, the courts, the publicity, the enforced living with some of the lowest scum you

can find, is not an easy thing to go through. And then, when he is out he'll have to face a good deal of veiled disapproval – mostly, I suspect, from women who have never had to be conscripted! But it's curious what a lot of support he has had from old soldiers, scientists, etc., and of course the Quakers would see him through anything. One of them, seeing Kiffer's case reported in the paper, with his speech from the dock, insisted on sending a cheque towards his fine. And, oh, the numbers who say I wish I had had the courage to do the same thing.

Well, I suppose it's difficult to fight the State, and though I don't go with Kiff the whole way, I do admire him for choosing prison in preference to two years in an army band, playing for dances and officer's messes, and pretending that that is national service!

I can't quite understand about (my brother) Jonathan's Grand Tour. I suppose this is when he is out of the army. Anyhow he is a lucky chap to be started off (at 21) with a cellar. I once took V.W. out to dinner at Layton's; and Layton (whose Father had been V.W.'s O.C. in the R.A.M.C. during the First World War) was so impressed (by V.W., of course, not me!) that he opened a bottle of port from Disraeli's cellar. What will Jonathan open on such an occasion?

It was sweet of your Mother to have offered the caravan, and I hope all will be well and that we can go, as I shall certainly need a break between Cheltenham and Hereford.

Yours, - Gerald

December 31.55

Dear Jeremy,

Jonathan is coming for a night or two next week, when I expect we shall hear more news of you. Meanwhile, your nice long letter was very welcome; and you must imagine a nice family group, typical of an R.A. picture of about 1899 – called, of course – 'News from the Front' – as gnarled and spectacled Grandad, fragile white-haired Grandmother, two offspring and a cat or two, gather round to read it!

... I like the song very much, and thought it very nice of you to have sent it – one of your best, I thought – and the texture gaining in clarity through not being too elaborate. The vocal line is good too, and I shall look forward to seeing the others, perhaps when you are at home. It's good to know that you have some time for getting on with music, and that the two years won't be such a waste of time for you as they are for so many.

Yes, things sound pretty unpleasant out in Cyprus, and I am afraid expediency is our only "moral" ground for being there. If the Russians did the same – well, of course, they have done the same – shouldn't we all be bubbling over with indignation. It's the great case against conscription, whatever the country, that one is forced to do utterly immoral things according to the policy of the moment. I think one should at least have the option of making one's own decisions on these matters.

Alas, I couldn't get to the Macnaghten concert and haven't heard any reports. It would have meant giving up another day out of a week from which too many days had already been taken. I gather there was a good audience and many more than at the previous two.

Isn't it rather a pity to concentrate on French songs, which the French can probably do better. I was sent a volume of English songs by a Danish composer, and felt he had made such a mistake! Alan Bush may be the right man for you. He will be a disciplinarian, but that should help you in the end. In spite of what you say – (or perhaps you don't know the difficulties of others) – music flows pretty easily from you, and the danger of over-flexibility is quite as great as constipation.

We all send our love and every happy wish for the New Year.

Gerald and Joy

I am aware that under the title 'A Composer's View: Second Thoughts' I could have given several quite different lectures: for instance, my feelings now about Finzi's music. They have obviously fluctuated, from youthful adoration to choosey, sometimes nitpicking condescension: for a long time I refrained from listening to it; I had to get it out of my system, move on. But like the Prodigal Son I came back: and the work that I've done for the Finzi Trust, editing some of the great larger works like the Cello Concerto and Love's Labours Lost, have brought me closer to him – almost at his elbow – than I ever was in his lifetime. And personally, apart from my respect for the superlative musicianship, 'professionalism', sometimes even virtuosity, that I've learned to recognize in his scores, it has long been a deep source of nourishment for me, to partake of his 'clear and gentle stream'.

But I make no excuse for what has turned out to be a bit of an ego-trip: I have been glad to seize the opportunity to revisit my early days: and this is really just a late thank-you-letter to Kiffer, without whose friendship all those years ago none of this would have happened.

JEREMY DALE ROBERTS – October 2006