

LEARNING FROM POETS – AND SINGERS

I have always lived with poetry – even as a boy. For many years, in the Thirties, my mother had been closely associated – as a ‘verse-speaker’, even sometimes as a sort of muse – with John Masefield and Gordon Bottomley at the celebrated Festivals of poetic drama and verse recitation at Boars Hill near Oxford. She did indeed have a most lovely voice. And so it was not considered eccentric or ‘pansy’ to have poetry around the house: Walter de la Mare’s Peacock Pie, A.A.Milne’s anthology A Child’s Garden of Verses, even Palgrave’s Golden Treasury, would be read to us at night, along with the usual childhood fare: we became accustomed to it. I don’t really go much for Masefield these days – though I still feel there are some magical things in de la Mare: but the important thing was that from the start I had the *sound* of poetry in my head, as well as its sense and structure on the page. And that was where the potency of its spell seemed to lie.

So it was natural, when I started composing in my teens, that I should turn to song, and try to set to music the words that seemed to say what I wanted to say myself. I still have, on the bottom shelf of my cupboard, a dishevelled volume of my earliest efforts. It contains settings of Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Yeats, and various minor Georgians: in other words what you might expect from a rather dreamy, callow young public-schoolboy of the nineteen-forties. Lyric, unproblematic verse. Although I came across Auden and Dylan Thomas in the 6th Form, and was bowled over by Gerald Manley Hopkins when he came my way, it would never have occurred to me to set their words. Too often, it was simply beyond me, inscrutable; and anyway much too dense in syllables as well as images for me to elucidate or to make my own. I recognized that there were certain types of poem which resist musical intrusion; and there are still vast tracts of poetry which I adore and would like to sing for myself, but which nevertheless carry a health warning: ‘Keep Off the Grass’.

This respect for the rights of the poet - some kind of immunity - was confirmed in my own approach to the setting of words, when as a student I discovered for the first time the songs of Debussy, Moussorgsky, Hugo Wolf, and in time Gerald Finzi. I was hugely impressed when I heard, that in preparing his great collections of Morike settings, Wolf had taken pains to ensure that his own name should appear on the title-page beneath that of his chosen poet. Each of these composers shows the same degree of respect for the text, its form and prosody; the same reluctance to resort to vocal extravagance or decoration: they share the same tact and scruple in contriving that the words should be heard. As Milton put it in his sonnet to Henry Lawes: words spanned ‘with just note and accent....’ And in my own song-writing I have preferred to go along with that.

Technically this involves obvious things like balance: not swamping the voice, or crowding and upstaging it with too much excessive detail in the instrumental texture. Also avoiding distortion of the text through gratuitous expansiveness, or by extending the length of vowels in long notes or expressive phrases (melismata) – the ‘Italianate’ lyric style cultivated by Britten and Tippett. Equally taboo is the gratuitous device of repeating words for emphasis. (Imagine what Houseman would have said to that!). Fundamentally all this amounts to an attempt to preserve a realistic declamation, in which the voice behaves ‘naturally’, at the speed of the spoken word.

So it behoves a composer to listen to the poet: after all, the poem came first. On the other hand, in a finished song, it is of course the musician who 'has the last word'. If he is to contribute anything, the composer must be ruthless in organizing his text: selecting and ordering what he wants, even omitting passages that he considers redundant. (Even Finzi did this occasionally). Once fired up, it is a joy to collect together a sheaf of poems – almost like curating an exhibition of paintings – to bind them into a cycle or song-set embodying some kind of theme or perhaps portrait: the sort of thing Britten did so well. Actually the first piece I wrote that made any impact was a cycle to poems by Denton Welch – a writer who died young who attracted a good deal of interest in the 50's. I remember I found in him a kind of fraternity; so that I was virtually compelled to write something around him. I think that is probably 'the name of the game': to paraphrase Finzi – 'the poet chooses you'. It was the same a bit later, when I came across the poetry of Ivor Gurney – all those trunkloads of typescripts high and dry in the loft at Ashmansworth, Gerald Finzi's home, before they were carted off by Joy to Gloucester Museum – I felt the same urgency: though this time I expressed my passionate empathy with Gurney, not in the large cantata that I had so carefully planned, but eventually in the form of an orchestral symphony. So it goes...

Gurney wouldn't leave me alone – he doesn't! Many years later, after not having written for the voice for a long time, I was casting around for a suitable text. I knew what I wanted: I was looking for something personal, authentic: 'taken from life'. Not lyrical, but prosaic, low-key. I looked at diaries, letters - for instance, Ivor Gurney's wonderful letters and scraps from the Front in the Great War. But again they defeated me. (Maybe there is just too much music in his words?) All at once I realized that it was Cavafy's poems that exactly fitted the bill: a kind of veracity - where the 'song' or dream is in the head, and the music of everyday speech - and often banal or sordid reality - is cherished, given value. He is the great Greek poet of Alexandria, whom I had first encountered by chance as a young National Serviceman in Cyprus, browsing through the shelves of Rustem's dingy bookshop in Metaxas Square in Nicosia. I was electrified by its beauty, candour and sensuality; and although it never occurred to me then to set those lines to music - I would not have been competent - Cavafy 'hung around' in the lumber-room of my imagination for the next twenty years or so - waiting. It was only when I was in my mid-forties that the penny dropped, and I found myself at last 'in synch' with Cavafy, looking back at our youth from a rather sad or ironic middle-age. (It's interesting that Finzi also had to wait, sometimes for decades, for an idea to fulfill itself).

Let's turn to singers for a moment – what would we do without them! I have to say that I was lucky, almost from the word go, to be privileged to work with all sorts of singers quite regularly, in all sorts of situations. As a young pianist I was a good sight-reader, so I was up for grabs for repetiteur work, coaching, and often, it has to be said, just note-bashing. I picked up a few valuable tips about vocal technique: articulation, breathing, the various registers - 'chest voice', 'head voice', etc. And 'support', which didn't just mean muscular support of the diaphragm, but the necessity of having a spare handkerchief around just in case things ended in tears at the end of an audition. For a long time I used to play for the German Lieder class at Morley College – an education in itself. All this meant that as a composer I've always tried to be 'on side' with the singer, to work *with* the voice rather than against.

I've also had the good fortune to work with some superlative artists; and it is a thrill to have one's music performed not only with commitment, but with that extra edge that experience and a unique personality can bring to it. Time to drop a few names, (some of whom may not be so well known now, so they will fall with a slight thud...). That Cavafy song-cycle that I mentioned earlier was written specifically with the voice and artistry of Stephen Varcoe in mind. I'd heard him do a broadcast of a very powerful piece to a Polish text by Nigel Osborne; and in fact it was the passion and authenticity of that performance that triggered my desire to return to song writing after a long gap, even before I had a notion of what I wanted to write. Luckily he liked what he saw when I presented the work to him, and I have a marvellous recording of the broadcast that he gave, in which his extraordinary understanding and sympathy with the psychology of the poetry is matched by his relish for the words themselves.

Usually I prefer to know, on quite a deep level, the artist for whom I compose: the sound they make, their particular kind of musicianship. (You can't really do this with an entire orchestra!). This was not the case with the big song-cycle I wrote to follow up the Denton Welch settings. It was composed to a French text, taken from Verlaine, de Banville and de Musset; and I remember how appalled Gerald Finzi was – I was at that time, kind of 'one of the family' – at my taking time off, to go setting 19th century French verse. It didn't stop him putting in a good word later, to see if it couldn't be taken up by Sophie Wyss, who had performed occasionally with the Newbury Strings. She had been – some of you may know – one of Benjamin Britten's first champions: she had given the first performance of 'Our Hunting Fathers' as well as 'Les Illuminations', which is actually dedicated to her. And this may explain why she turned ashy pale when we first met: apparently as a young man I was the absolute spit of the young Benjamin Britten; and in 1956 she was evidently still deeply wounded by his excommunication of her, only 15 or so years before.

She was a wonderful woman, warm-hearted and generous, and unstinting in the time and trouble she spent in preparing a piece, which she could not anticipate would ever become a staple of her repertoire. Of Swiss origins, she had made her career in England following her marriage to her stockbroker husband, Humphrey. They lived in a villa in Surbiton, together with a duck called Dorothy, who seemed to take up a lot of space. We used to have passionate discussions about French *mélodies*; and once I made the mistake of rapturously praising Maggie Teyte's recordings of Debussy's Verlaine settings. There was an instant coolness; and she made it very clear that Maggie Teyte was simply not up to the mark as a francophone, and anyway Fauré's settings were infinitely superior. Alas, I lost long ago the BBC recording that she made with Ernest Lush, in which her voice, no longer young, conveyed an autumnal sadness which perfectly suited the melancholy of the words.

Obviously, when one is commissioned to write for a particular singer, the nature of the voice is paramount, its particular qualities, its timbre, its limitations. I had a fascinating time quite recently writing for the early music specialist Evelyn Tubb. Her clean, incisive, non vibrato, style conditioned in a fundamental way my setting of a Shakespeare sonnet, in which I gave her a rich background of two bass viols – like a kind of arras.

I have been so lucky, all along the way, to cross paths with such remarkable musicians, even if only in passing. Pauline Brockless, Norman Tattersall – names no longer remembered, but prominent and stalwart in their day, launched my first efforts. And long before he became famous, one of John Shirley Quirk's first professional engagements was as one of the chorus in some incidental music I wrote for the Edinburgh Festival. Subsequently he enthusiastically took on the baritone part in a cycle called 'Florilegium' – a set of flower poems – for vocal and instrumental ensembles. One doesn't forget these things: they're a generous lot, these singers. Through the Finzis' I met Wilfred Brown and John Carol Case, both of them encouraging and always friendly. An unforgettable day at Ashmansworth, when with Joy Finzi and Kiffer, John and I went through heaps of unpublished songs by Ivor Gurney, to see what could be retrieved: an extraordinary, poignant journey, finding jewels and precious fragments among all the flotsam.

Sometimes singers are asked to do rather unusual things, besides singing. This afternoon's soloist, Sue Bickley, is no exception. Long ago – best forgotten – I was asked to write a piece for a summer festival held in a beautiful estate by a millhouse. We are talking tents, cool breezes, the constant sound of rushing water – and most pertinently the reliably unreliable English Summer weather. Not the most propitious set-up for a subtle, atmospheric evocation of the Hamadryad, the mythic woodnymph of classical Greece: but that's exactly what I did. I wrote it for voice, bass flute, violin, and piano, almost throughout kept at a low pianissimo dynamic; and the text was entirely composed of Classical Greek phonemes taken from the names of trees, carrying no sense whatsoever. Nature – the best critic – had the last word: like something out of King Lear, the wind whistled down the ravine, the piano went out of tune, the violin was inaudible, only the grunting of the bass-flute could be heard. Needless to say, Sue Bickley showed herself to be a real trooper.

Let's get back to poetry. History shows it can take possession of a composer in all sorts of ways, not just vocally: you have only to think of the symphonic poems of the Romantics, or the piano music of the French impressionists. I don't depend upon a poetic stimulus to get me going; but often, saturated in the work of a particular poet, I will try to match his images in musical imagery of my own. That symphony based on Ivor Gurney was a start; my most recent work, called *Tristia*, a set of 6 pieces for violin and piano, is inspired by the sequence with the same name written by the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam in 1917-19, in which he evokes the dark canals of St Petersburg and the doomed generation of young poets who congregated there. Sometimes I go further, and try to penetrate the poetic structures as well as the moods I am drawn to. For instance, the sonnet is a fascinatingly intricate form of rhyming schemes and metre; and I have written a number of them for instruments, most notably in a large sequence for solo guitar, called *Casidas and Sonnets of Dark Love*, based on the poems of Lorca, and imagining what poems he would have written if he had not been put to death.

I am happy to have counted two poets among my very closest friends. The first was Philip Oxman, an American from Chicago, who had lived in Europe for many years. He was an actor, with a superb voice; an 'intellectual' of formidable grasp and imagination – he had been an intimate of Susan Sontag and George Steiner; and he happened to be the lover of my wife's best friend... It was almost inevitable that we should collaborate. He presented me with a collection entitled 'Uneasy Love-songs';

but I recognized immediately that they were not ‘fit for purpose’, as they say. There were too many, they were too long; and they certainly didn’t seem to strike any bells as regards the usual kind of vocal setting. What struck me right away, was that they were already filled with a kind of musical sonority: he made great play with devices like alliteration, internal rhymes, focussing on particular phonemes – sibilants, diphthongs, etc. – to create a virtual ‘orchestration’ of speech-sounds. This was the late 60’s: a period when, in France especially and the USA, a lot of critical and analytical work was being done in linguistics and semiotics. The rallying cry was ‘deconstruction’, the atomizing of a text; and this attitude was enthusiastically taken up in music too, most notably in the work of the Italian composer, Luciano Berio. I was enthralled by all this; and my approach to Philip’s poems, was to take a couple of them, set them for a speaker accompanied by an ensemble of musicians, and in a process lasting 20 minutes or so, gradually break them down to their syllabic essentials, synthesize them, so that in the end the speaker would be left with pure ‘tone’ – if you like, ‘music’ - and the musicians would be reduced to percussive sonorites – if you like, ‘phonetic’ textures. I called it ‘Reconciliation’: a process of metamorphosis, distillation. I don’t know whether any of that makes sense – but it seemed to work, and taught me a great deal about what actually constitutes a poem.

As a writer, Ursula Vaughan Williams’s reputation chiefly rests on the wonderful biography she wrote of her husband, Ralph. I don’t think anybody would make any great claims for her novels, but the libretti and texts she provided for a fair number of composers – including Elizabeth Maconchy, Malcolm Williamson, Elizabeth Lutyens, Jonathan Dove, and many others – testify to the appeal that her work had : her wit, her ingenuity with words, as well as the sensuous luxuriance of her imagery. She had always been a poet, and had collections published when she was a young woman. But although she counted a number of poets among her friends, she was never really taken seriously. Sylvia Townsend Warner hit the nail on the head, I think, when she said that it was ‘too Parnassian’ for her taste: too rich - like brocade - and maybe sometimes mannered. And I’m afraid that was my view too, certainly with regard to the longer poems.

This was a tacit regret between us, most felt when I was very close to her, living in her house, often helping her in her work in one way or another – (her punctuation was notoriously erratic). And in fact I never set a word of her poetry in all the long years that I knew her. It was only after her death, when I was asked to contribute a setting of one of her poems to a celebratory concert at the Royal College, that I kind of ‘jumped’: I knew immediately which one I wanted to do – lines ‘Spoken to a Bronze Head’. This was the portrait bust of VW made by Jacob Epstein made in 1948 - which in point of fact neither of them liked very much! It was actually the later version by David McFall that they favoured. This stood always in her sitting room, a benign presence, a ‘virtual’ companion in her long widowhood.

Bronze, where my curious fingers run
matching each muscle and each metal feature
with life's austerer structure of the bone,
each living plane and contour so well known,
you will endure beyond the span of nature,
be as you are now when our lives are done.

On unborn generations you will stare
with the same hollow eyes I touch and see,
look on a world in which no memories share
the living likeness of the face you wear,
keep, in unchanged serenity
all that time gave him in your guardian care.

His name is yours to keep, so will his glory be,
who are his only, his inheriting son :
and when the hand that writes so ardently
the sound of unknown sound reaches finality,
the music captured, all the work well done,
stand in his place and bravely wear his immortality.

This is a tremendous poem, impeccable, disciplined: rich and authentic: why did I not seize it long ago! No excuse! There are problems for the composer: it's quite long, the lines are long, weighty – not much scope for expansion, or lyricism; but anyway I wanted to stick to the rhetoric, which has something noble and Augustan about it – maybe an echo of Dryden. An 'arioso' style seemed in order: my setting is very simple, austere. It is of course a kind of memorial, also a salute: and I wanted to enshrine in it the two of them, Ralph and Ursula. So, at the heart of it is a clangorous, bronze-like chord, lifted from the last movement of VW's 6th Symphony, from which I quote a passage just before the conclusion.

When you hear this song later this afternoon, sung by Sue Bickley, maybe you will like to envisage Ursula looking at and touching the image of Ralph, my listening to her voice and verse – and of course learning from both of them.

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