

COMPOSERS AND THEIR MUSIC

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Discernible Poetic and Philosophical Influences
in the Works of Gerald Finzi

Gavin Meredith

DISCERNIBLE POETIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES IN THE WORKS OF GERALD FINZI - Gavin Meredith

Literature, in particular English poetry, was a driving force behind much of Finzi's inspiration and creativity; this has biographical roots in that, after the death of his father and brothers, he became a lonely child, finding solace only in reading. At his death, he left a collection of over three thousand books, which now reside in the Finzi Book Room at Reading University.

The range of authors in his collection shows that poetical inspiration was diverse, from medieval English poets through to contemporary twentieth-century writers. One figure, however, stands out dramatically in terms of influence, Thomas Hardy. Finzi found in his work some special affinity and his commitment to Hardy's poetry is unrivalled in the genre of English song, even though Finzi apparently cared little for his novels. As early as 1921, whilst the poet was still alive, he was devising a cycle of Hardy songs called *The Mound* (which remained incomplete). He did complete the cycle of six songs entitled *By Footpath and Stile* for baritone and string quartet, although he later withdrew this, apart from the two songs *By Footpath and Stile* and *The Oxen*.

There are two recurring themes in Hardy's poetry with which Finzi seems to have identified specifically, and these are reflected in his choice of texts:

- (i) the relentless passing of time
- (ii) man's subservience to nature and its cycles.

These interrelate in many songs, or are subsidiary notions on which the introduction of related ideas occurs.

The unstoppable *Clock of the Years* (Finzi set Hardy's poem of this name in the set *Earth, Air and Rain*) stirred worries in Finzi from an early age, and as early as 1920 he set Herrick's verse entitled *Time was Upon the Wing*. A brush with tuberculosis in 1928 instilled in him the fear that he would not complete everything he hoped to, and in the preface to the catalogue of his works in 1951, having been diagnosed as suffering from the fatal Hodgkin's Disease, he quoted Chideock Tycheborne's lines, written on the eve of his execution.

"My thread is cut and yet it is not spun
And now I live, and now my life is done."

In the same paragraph, he wrote:

"As usually happens, it is likely that new ideas, new fashions and the pressing forward of new generations, will soon obliterate my small contribution."

Finzi had seen that the passing of time had caused the neglect of several eighteenth-century English composers whom he considered to be of high merit, and he even collected rare species of apple tree, so that time would not lose them forever.

The Hardy songs which deal directly with this idea include *I look into my glass*, *Former Beauties*, *Waiting Both*, *In years defaced* and *The Clock of the Years*. In *I look into my glass*, the passage of time is represented by throbbing *poco tenuto* chords (mostly on off beats) with a pedal note in the upper right hand voice.

Adagio

I look in-to my glass, And view my wast-ing skin, And

poco ten *pp* *a tempo* *cresc.*

The idea of pedal notes is carried on by the piano's right hand after the voice enters, but the offbeat pulsing only returns to herald the phrase "But Time, to make me grieve, part steals, lets part abide; And shakes this fragile frame with throbbings of noontide". The world-weary feeling in the piano introduction is slowed down even further at the end,

a tempo

But Time, to make me grieve, Part steals, lets part a-bide, And

shakes this fra-gle frame at eve With throb-bings of noon-tide.

pp *cresc.* *p* *dim* *al.* *niente*

first by a slower harmonic pace, and secondly by a rhythmical augmentation; from the word "noon-tide" the time value of notes increases thus:

♪ ♪ ♪. ♪ ♪

Linked to the passage of time is Hardy's "voicing of graveyard obsessions dealing with the eventual decomposition of human bodies into their natural elements" (Banfield 1985:278), which is reflected in Finzi's setting of *Transformations, In a Churchyard* and *In Five-Score Summers*.

Finzi reflects aspects of Nature in Hardy's work most obviously in the titles of the song sets *Before and After Summer* and *Earth, Air and Rain*. They are not cycles and so contain no unifying themes or narrative ideas, but the use of natural images recurs in many songs such as *Summer Schemes*, *Proud Songsters*, *Overlooking the River* and *Childhood Among the Ferns*. The first two of these form the opening and closing songs of *Earth, Air and Rain* respectively. The use of bird imagery in the closing of the last song harks back to the phrase "When friendly summer calls again, calls again her little fifers to these hills" in the first verse of the first song, thus providing aesthetic balance to the set, although the imagery is by no means pervasive enough to justify the term "cycle". Hardy typically presents man as having a subservient role in nature as summed up in the opening lines of the song *Let me enjoy the Earth*:

Let me enjoy the earth no less
Because the all enacting might
That fashioned forth its loveliness
Had other aims than my delight.

Often, the use of specific features of nature occurs not for mere description but to convey a philosophical message. For example, *The Comet at Yell'ham* reads thus:

It bends far over Yell' ham Plain,
And we, from Yellham Height,
Stand and regard its fiery train,
So soon to swim from sight.

It will return long years hence, when
As now its strange swift shine
Will fall on Yell'ham; but not then
On that sweet form of thine

Here Hardy introduces the notion of human mortality through the fact that the time cycle of a comet dwarfs the span of a human life. In this case, the human is obviously a loved one, so Hardy is also reminding us that even the strongest of human emotions, such as love, are actually made insignificant as time and nature's cycles roll relentlessly on. This pessimism is typical and he is rarely wholly joyous (as in, say, *Ditty*). His love poems are predominantly negative, be they of the unrequited variety (*Lizbie Brown* or *I say I'll seek her side*), about love that is finished (*It never looks like summer here*) or even insistently negative (*I said to Love*). However, although pervasive, the pessimism is often accompanied by a philosophical acceptance of what fate or destiny has in store. The second verse of *Let me Enjoy the Earth* is a case in point.

About my path there flits a Fair,
Who throws me not a word or sign.
I'll charm me with her ignoring air
And laud the lips not meant for mine.

Use of the words "charm" and "laud" are surprising in this context of unrequited love and Finzi illustrates them with a contrary motion passage starting at the word "charm," which bursts temporarily into music of pure joy with nothing to suggest the expected sorrow associated with unrequited love. It is at the end of the song that Finzi's genius is revealed. The text is as follows:

And some day Hence, towards Paradise
And all its blest- if such should be -
I will lift glad, afar-off eyes,
Though it containeth no place for me.

Again, the tone of acceptance, exaggerated by the word "glad" in the third line, is almost incredulous since Finzi has depicted it throughout using the warm key of G-flat major. The music wanders modally in and out

of E flat minor, but there are no added accidentals or other modulations, and the prevailing musical mood is that of *Andante Amabile*. Just as the song closes, Finzi introduces a jarring dissonance in the piano's left hand in bar 34:

32

rall. poco a poco

p

3

Though it con-tain no place for me.....

pp

The tonic chord of G flat major is held by the right hand while against it the left hand strikes B double flat and E double flat (the minor third and minor sixth respectively in G flat). Finzi thus shatters the *amabile* feeling and questions the poet's claimed contentment, introducing the notion that human insecurity would make such a positive attitude to these subjects impossible. It is a marvellous example of a composer implying a musical subtext.

It has been commented that one thing that Finzi empathised with in Hardy's work was a lack of religious faith. In a letter to Robin Milford, written the day after war broke out in 1939, Finzi wrote, "I still feel that we're a lot of beehives without a beekeeper - or if there is one, he's looking the other way." Stephen Banfield sees the comparison as follows:

"Hardy's rejection of Christianity was brittle, often irritably defiant. Finzi's was more nostalgic: personally unable to accept the Christian myth, he was nevertheless capable of wishing that its Truth might be regenerated for him." (Banfield 1985:275)

However, the two men's ideas were not always so far apart. Hardy's views were not always that of an out-and-out atheist, as Christopher Walbank describes:

"In the novels there is satire of the Church, there are attacks on outmoded doctrine and there is constant questioning of the existence of a loving God, but at no point in the novels does Hardy, as author, deny the existence of God... the author's tone in them is not that of the dogmatic atheist but rather that of the sceptical rationalist, drawing attention to the sadder facts of human existence and frankly disbelieving that any loving God could have planned things that way." (Walbank 1979:96)

It is surely this side to his character with which Finzi empathised; his own childhood had been strewn with the "sadder facts of human existence" - the deaths of his father, three brothers and his first composition tutor Ernest Farrar. Hence, the Hardy poems Finzi chose to set concerning death tend to have a romanticised idea of the afterlife, such as in *The Dance Continued*.

Regret not me: Beneath the sunny tree I
Lie uncaring, slumbering peacefully.

A similar view is evident in *In a Churchyard (Song of the Yew Tree)*:

If the living could but hear
What is heard by my roots as they creep
Round the restful flock, and the things said there,
No one would weep.
New set among the wise,
They say: 'Enlarged in scope
That no God trumpet us to rise
We truly hope.'

It is against this backdrop of Finzi the agnostic that we should view his settings of religious texts. Finzi used text from the Bible on three occasions: the *Magnificat*, *Let us now praise famous men* and *In terra Pax*, which takes part of its text from St Luke's Gospel. Although he wrote other pieces on religious subjects such as the anthem *God is gone up*, to someone unaware of Finzi's personal beliefs he would fit comfortably into the English choral tradition. Certainly, his training under Edward Bairstow between 1915 and 1919 reinforces this image, as Finzi had often sat with him in the organ loft at York Minster where he must surely have gained invaluable knowledge of choral writing. His sacred *Two Motets*, written in 1922, were dedicated to Bairstow.

There seems to be a paradox, therefore, between the man who on one hand worships Hardy with his anti-Christian views and on the other the man who set texts such as the *Magnificat*. The answer lies both in Banfield's idea that "he was nevertheless capable of wishing that its [the Christian myth's] truth might be regenerated for him" and, equally importantly, as Paul Spicer (conductor of the Finzi Singers) pointed out in conversation with the author, in his sheer love of words and poetry. Finzi deliberately wrote the *Magnificat*, one of the most traditional texts for an English composer to set, for non-liturgical use as it omits the *Gloria*. However, Finzi did ally himself strongly to the continuing English church tradition in writing the anthem *Lo, the Full, Final Sacrifice*, a setting of Richard Crashaw's English versions of the St. Thomas Aquinas hymns *Adoro te* and *Lauda Sion*. This was written at the request of Walter Hussey, vicar of St. Matthew's, Northampton, who started a long line of annual commissions in 1943 with Britten's *Rejoice in the Lamb* and Tippett's *Festival Fanfare*. Many well-known English composers including Arnold, Leighton and Howells had their turn at enriching the list of works to which these commissions gave birth. Finzi was not the first agnostic to write church music. Howells, who wrote a large body of sacred music said, "I am not a religious man any more than Ralph [Vaughan Williams]" (Ottaway 1980: 746). The reason for Howells' love of writing church music lies in his "love of choral texture in a resonant acoustic which expresses itself with a characteristic modality and chromaticism, a spiritualised sensuousness and a natural lyrical flow" (Ottaway 1980: 746). The same could be said of Finzi. Furthermore the strong sense of tradition, coupled with figures such as Walter Hussey, who were eager to commission works, meant that regular performance of a new work was more likely than, for example, an abstract instrumental piece; Finzi's anthems *Lo, the Full, Final Sacrifice* and *God is Gone Up* have thus become part of the Church's mainstream repertoire.

Religious conceptions also formed the basis of some of Finzi's other vocal works. He had a great love of the metaphysical poets, in particular Thomas Traherne, whose texts were used for perhaps his most celebrated vocal work, *Dies Natalis*, a cantata for high voice and strings. The essence of this work concerns the innocence with which man is born into the world, as summed up in the following extract from the singer's opening recitative:

"I knew not that there were sins or complaints or laws. I dream'd not of poverties,
contentions or vices. All tears and quarrels were hidden from mine eyes. I saw all in the
peace of Eden. Everything was at rest, free and immortal."

Childhood innocence was obviously something that struck a chord with Finzi, as it is also the subject of his largest choral work *Intimations of Immortality* and the songs *Intrada*, *On parent knees*, *Childhood among the ferns*, *To Joy* and *The Birthright*. This fascination was obviously an outward expression of regret that

his own childhood innocence had been shattered in such a devastating way by the loss of virtually all his close family. Although it would be obvious to compare this with Britten's interest in the same subject, there is a vital difference between the two, which Howard Ferguson sees as being that Finzi was taken more by the concept of innocence on its own, compared with Britten's obsession with the loss of naiveté during and after childhood.

To a lesser extent, the themes on which Finzi drew in the Hardy poems are evident in several other vocal works. Death and mortality are the subject of the *Three short elegies* for chorus, as well as songs such as *Fear no more the heat o' the sun* and *Come away, death*. Human mortality is also looked at in the song *To a poet*, but from an atypically positive angle, with the idea that an artist, in a certain sense, gains immortality through the legacy of his works that will communicate his ideas to generation after generation. One subject, dealt with in only two Hardy songs, is the futility of war (*Channel Firing* and *Only a man harrowing clods*, which was used in the early *Requiem da Camera*). This notion was given further airings in *Farewell to Arms*, *June on Castle Hill* and the *Lament* and *August 1914* from the *Requiem da Camera*. This requiem was dedicated to the memory of his composition tutor Ernest Farrar, who was killed on active service in September 1918. It is no surprise to discover, then, that Finzi was a pacifist. The baritone John Cameron recalls paying a visit to Finzi to seek performance advice on some songs. On entering the house he noticed some photographs; Finzi pointed to one of them, exclaiming proudly "That's my son. He's in prison, you know!" then explaining to the surprised singer that his son, Christopher, had been imprisoned for conscientious objection. Finzi's distress at the events before and after the start of World War II can be seen in his letters, especially those written to and from William Busch, which Banfield quotes in full (1997:260-268).

Man's subservience to Nature is seen in *Harvest*, which ends with Edmund Blunden's lines:

The Sun's eye laughing looks.
And Earth accuses none that goes among her stooks.

Apart from Hardy, Shakespeare is the next most frequently-used poet, with nine completed settings. Most significant of these are the five collected under the title *Let us garlands bring*, which has become one of his most popular works. Assembled from songs written between 1929 and 1942, the overwhelming feature of this set is the freshness that he brings to words set countless times by other English composers. (Boyd noted in 1954 that the same lyrics continued to attract "the fancy of many others eager for recognition. Thus they are useful to compare the relative talents of different composers." (1954:17) In discussing these settings, Stephen Liley states that "Finzi's songs contain none of Warlock's archaism" (1988:28), but the imitative contrapuntal nature to the accompaniment and false relations clearly demonstrate some degree of archaic influence.

Two other figures are prominent in terms of numbers of settings, Edmund Blunden and Robert Bridges. Blunden was the only poet with whom Finzi had a working relationship. Before they first met, Finzi had admired his work and set the poem *To Joy*. Their friendship was sealed through such shared interests as the editing and promotion of the poems and songs of Ivor Gurney and their artistic relationship became such that when embarking on their first collaboration together, the choral work *For St. Cecilia*, Finzi could suggest alterations to the original text so that it would lend itself more easily to musical setting. For their next choral joint venture, part of *A Garland for the Queen*¹, there was further collaboration before the definitive text was chosen. Stephen Banfield quotes a letter from Finzi to Blunden on receiving the first draft of the text, which gives great insight into Finzi's natural feeling for the innate musicality of verse and the strength of his relationship with the poet, which allowed him to suggest such large alterations:

"... and as the verses are not strophic they will all need separate treatment. This is all to the good, but it does mean a possible lack of some cohesive musical idea. If necessary, could some short couplet be devised (the same for all three verses)?" (Banfield 1985:440-1)

¹ A group of ten choral works collected from leading composers to celebrate the 1953 Coronation. The other composers were Vaughan Williams, Tippett, Rawsthorne, Bax, Berkeley, Ireland, Rubbra, Bliss and Howells.

Finzi's usual method of composition was such that he would begin settings of poems for which he felt an immediate affinity. He wrote:

"Some composers have never written a song or a choral work without at least a line being instantly matched with a musical equivalent on the very first reading of the words. That 'initial excitement' brought the intellect into play to carry the emotion to its end." (Quoted by D. McVeagh in the sleeve-notes to CDA66161-2)

This approach must have been somewhat more difficult in the above instance, as Blunden had given him only two poems to choose between, a far cry from his usual freedom of choice; the lack of "initial excitement" might have been the cause for it to "fall short of musical conviction" (Banfield 1997 p. 442), although the same could not be said of *For St. Cecilia*.

Finzi had planned a Blunden cycle and had started four other songs, but, as on many other occasions, the intellect could not develop the "initial excitement" to its emotional end, which resulted in his leaving forty-seven fragments of songs (he only completed eighty-seven songs). The poems of Robert Bridges account for ten complete settings. Seven of them comprise the part-songs *Opus 17*, the others being *In Terra Pax* (where Bridges' poem is set alongside a passage from St. Luke's Gospel), the male part-song *Thou didst delight my eyes* and the song *Since we loved*. The latter is especially poignant as it was the last song he would complete and it is a tribute to a loved one (presumably in this case his wife Joy). It contains within its concentrated twenty bars all the hallmarks of his style: the lack of melisma in the vocal writing, the subtle use of dissonance (especially in the piano introduction) and a use of modality with hints at the relative minor. The form is closed in that it restates the opening at the end, and, in between, the bass line gives the piece an arc-like structure that rises stepwise to the midpoint of the song before sliding back downwards. Finzi uses the peak to indicate the change of emphasis in the text that focuses in the second half on the first person (as underlined in the poem):

Since we loved, (the earth that shook as we kissed, fresh beauty took)
Love has been as poet's paint, Life as heaven is to a saint;
All my joys my hope excel, All my work hath prosper'd well,
All my songs have happy been, O my love, my life, my queen.

Finzi reserves the widest vocal leap (a seventh) for the thematic summation in the words "O my love".

Other poets Finzi used are as diverse as Rossetti (*O fair to see*) and Chaucer (*Rondel*) but none command more than two settings. One noticeable omission is A.E. Housman whose works, in the first third of the century, it became almost *de rigueur* to set; Somervell, Vaughan Williams, Ireland and C.C. Orr represent only a few of the many composers who responded to the great musicality of his *Shropshire Lad* poems. Indeed, the sheer wealth of settings prompted Constant Lambert to write that

"since the *Shropshire Lad* himself published his last poems some ten years ago it may without impertinence be suggested that it is high time his musical followers published their last songs" (1934:284).

The list of complete and incomplete settings by Finzi in *Sensibility and English Song* (Banfield 1985:445) records, however, that Finzi started nine different Housman settings in the 1920s, thus allying him with the general trend in English music at the time. That he must have felt Housman to be a kindred spirit is evident in the choice of poems he started to set; the futility of war is the subject of *The lads in their hundreds*, and the passing of time that of *We'll to the woods no more*.

Howard Ferguson has related that in public Finzi came across as having "a bubbling sense of fun", although he continues with: "beneath this incisive and buoyant exterior lay a deep and fundamental pessimism" (1957:154). Bearing the latter statement in mind, this study has shown that Finzi did express his personal philosophies through his choice of texts.

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