

What Sweeter Music

Performed

In December of 1843 Charles Dickens dashed off a short seasonal book in the hope of making some quick money. *A Christmas Carol* became an instant success and its characters and story quickly passed into the public domain. In 1871 Sir John Stainer published his anthology *Christmas Carols Old and New*, which rapidly became the standard versions and harmonizations used by succeeding generations to this day. It is little wonder that when we think of Christmas, Victorian traditions inevitably spring to mind. *What Sweeter Music* celebrates the rich musical heritage of an English Christmas.

This year marks the centenary of the birth of Gerald Finzi, one of the most English of all English composers. He was part of a remarkable renaissance in English music which began toward the end of the nineteenth century and included composers such as Finzi's contemporaries Gustav Holst, Benjamin Britten and Peter Warlock, all of whom are represented on this program. He was born into a wealthy family and for the most part never had to worry about having to make a living, but that did not shield him from personal tragedy. His father died when he was seven and before he was eighteen he experienced the death of all three older brothers and his first music teacher, Edward Farrar, who had enlisted and died in the war. Finzi was a solitary, introspective child and an indifferent student, once remaining in the same grade at one school for four years and feigning fainting spells to be sent home from another. Ironically, Finzi was to become perhaps the most literary of all composers. He was widely read and amassed a huge collection of poetry. And it was his affinity with the written word which provided the inspiration for his composition, the vast majority of which was songs and choral works.



Finzi's other passion was the English countryside. His mother had removed the family from London to the rural Yorkshire countryside at the outbreak of World War I. After Farrar's death, Finzi relocated to the Cotswolds in Gloucestershire, an area intimately associated with Vaughan Williams, whom Finzi idolized, and the whole pastoral movement in English composition which was then in vogue. It was there that Finzi not only began composing but also received the inspiration for one of his most well-known works, *In terra pax*. In 1930 Finzi moved to London where he became close friends with Vaughan Williams, but three years later returned to the countryside with his wife, artist Joy Black, and built a country estate near Newbury, where he housed his poetry collection and began planting apples (he is credited with saving several endangered native varieties.) He split his time between composition and editing eighteenth and early nineteenth century English music. He also founded the Newbury String Players and conducted the ensemble

until his death in 1956, not only reviving a great deal of neglected eighteenth century music but performing contemporary pieces as well.

The text of the *Magnificat* is Mary's response to her cousin Elizabeth, whom she visited immediately after being told by the angel Gabriel that she was to bear Jesus, so it is properly part of the Christmas story. Finzi's setting of this text was written in 1952 on commission from Iva Dee Hyatt, music director of Smith College, for a secular Christmas concert. The *Magnificat* gave Finzi a great deal of trouble. Never a facile composer, he always worked best from his own inspiration and he barely completed the score before the deadline, scribbling the "Amen" on a scrap of paper while riding in the car. Although Finzi complained that the *Magnificat* was only workmanlike he was sufficiently pleased with it to orchestrate it in 1956. The music clearly demonstrates Finzi's approach to text. The long vocal lines are rhythmically complex, changing meter frequently, but matching exactly the cadence of the underlying text, presenting the text naturally and understandably. Within that context, Finzi is still able to engage in some graphic imagery, such as the descending intervals in the text "He hath put down the mighty," and he also plays with word sounds, creating symmetrical settings for the texts centered around "magnify" and "Abraham."

The Brightness of This Day is a setting of poet Henry Vaughn's *The True Christmas*, written in 1922 while Finzi was still a student. The melody is a harmonization of the folk melody *The Truth Sent from Above*, which had been collected and published by Vaughan Williams. The piece opens with the baritone solo, set rather freely over a pedal, for the first two stanzas. Finzi adds complexity to each succeeding stanza, with the chorus entering a cappella on the third, chorus and accompaniment on the fourth, and then a grand unison statement on the last stanza.

In terra pax is probably Finzi's best known work. It is a setting of Robert Bridges' poem *Noel: Christmas Eve, 1913* into which a portion of the Christmas story from the Gospel of St. Luke has been interpolated. Finzi began work on the piece in 1951 but it was not completed until 1954. Finzi gives the somewhat introspective words of the poem to the baritone solo, while the soprano solo and chorus take the part of the angels in the biblical text. The poem reminded Finzi greatly of a particular Christmas Eve party he had attended as a young man living on Chosen Hill Farm in Gloucestershire. They had all come out at midnight into the crisp, cold air, and had heard bells ringing across the countryside from all the villages. These bells became the wonderful "glory to God in the highest" section of *In terra pax*. After the baritone solo reflects on the angelic song, the chorus enters again, softly repeating "and on earth peace, good will toward men." *In terra pax* sadly figured indirectly in Finzi's death. During the Three Choirs Festival in 1956, Finzi took Vaughan Williams up to Chosen Hill to show him the spot where he had taken his inspiration for *In terra pax*. They stopped in at the sexton's cottage, unaware that the sexton's children had recently come down with chicken pox. Finzi, already severely weakened by Hodgkin's lymphoma, radiation therapy and an experimental splenectomy, contracted an encephalitic form of the disease and died on September 27, 1956.

There are four other English composers featured in the second half of the concert. John Rutter (b. 1945) is probably the best known choral composer and editor in Britain today. After teaching for several years at Clare College, Cambridge, he founded the Cambridge Singers as a professional recording ensemble and now splits his time between conducting and composition. *What Sweeter Music* is a beautiful setting of a text by the seventeenth century poet Robert Herrick. Peter Warlock (1894-1930) was a pseudonym for composer and editor Philip Heseltine. Like Finzi, he was of a very literary bent, was particularly interested in early music, and produced the vast bulk of his output in songs and choral music (although he is best known for his instrumental suite *Capriol*, based on 16th century courtly dances.) *Adam Lay Ybounden* is set to an anonymous 15th century text. *Balulalow* is a lullaby with text by the brothers Wedderburn and modeled after one of Martin Luther's cradle songs.

A Hymn to the Virgin is a macaronic carol, that is, one with both English and Latin text. The Latin phrase usually comes at the end of the line and either completes or paraphrases the English text. Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) composed this work in 1930 during a stay in his school's infirmary. He gives the English text to a large chorus and the Latin text to a semi-chorus. Gustav Holst (1874-1934) was a major figure in the English music renaissance. A close friend of Vaughan Williams, he struggled to make a living in music until he obtained the position of music director at St. Paul's Girls' School, where he remained for a number of years. This unusually martial sounding *Personent hodie* was written in 1916 during the same period that he was composing his best known work, the orchestral suite *The Planets*. The text and melody were taken from the *Piæ Cantiones*, a 16th century compilation of Latin hymns which had just received its first English publication in 1913. *Personent hodie* was probably originally written to be sung at the Feast of the Holy Innocents, December 28, which commemorates the young boys slain by King Herod in his vain attempt to kill the baby Jesus. The feast was celebrated with a role reversal in which the boy choristers, under the leadership of a boy bishop, displaced the senior clergy from the choir stalls and led the service.

The Boar's Head Carol is another macaronic carol. It was traditionally sung at the Christmas Feast at Queen's College, Oxford, when the eponymous boar's head was carried in. The *Oxford Book of Carols* dutifully notes that the boar's head was so central to the English feast that it had been hunted to extinction in England by the 17th century. *I Saw Three Ships* is another traditional carol whose story ultimately derived from the legend that the bodies of the Three Magi were carried on three ships to Constantinople. *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* is a wassail song, one in which wandering carolers sang to the health of households, hoping for a libation in return. Despite the somewhat petulant tone of this carol, wassailers and the blessings they invoked were highly regarded.

Three of the sing-along carols for this concert are heard in wonderful arrangements by noted choral conductor Sir David Willcocks, who for nearly forty years led the Bach Choir of London. The young Willcocks was also part of Finzi's musical circle and conducted a number of his choral works. *O Come, All Ye Faithful* has an interesting history. Although it sounds like an ancient Latin hymn and was often identified as such, it was actually written about 1741 by John Francis Wade, a music engraver who had

emigrated to an English Catholic community in Douay, France. The English translation was provided about a century later by Frederick Oakley, an Anglican minister turned Catholic priest who maintained an extensive mission to London's poor. *The First Nowell* is so familiar to us that we probably don't notice how unusual the melody is, ending on the third of the chord rather than the root. It probably represents the descant part to a melody which has since been lost. The melody for *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* was taken from a Mendelssohn cantata celebrating the life of Johann Gutenberg, inventor of the printing press. It was the hymnist William Cummings who in 1855 married that tune with a text written by Charles Wesley.

Deck the Hall is a traditional Welsh song, celebrating not Christmas but New Year's Eve. The original format would have been a series of extemporaneous verses, each line of which was answered by the harp. The harp music has become the nonsense "fa la la" syllables at the end of each line. The text of *Joy to the World* is a paraphrase of Psalm 98 written by English hymnist Isaac Watts (1674-1748). The melody is often attributed to Handel in hymn books, but the connection to Handel is tenuous and seems only to be the similarity of the opening measure to the choruses *Glory to God* or *Lift Up Your Heads* from *Messiah*. It was the American hymnist Lowell Mason (1792-1872) who in 1836 provided the setting in use today, adapting an earlier English hymn tune.

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