



ars organi

Empire to Commonwealth – Booklet Note

I have seen much to hate here, much to forgive,
But in a world where England is finished and dead,
I do not wish to live.

'The White Cliffs,' by Alice Duer Miller (1874–1942)

FORMALLY THE BRITISH Empire ended on 15 August 1947, when a motherland altogether exhausted by austerity's privations, by the struggle against Hitler, and by continued terrorist attacks against her troops in Mandatory Palestine decided that she could no longer afford to delay India's independence. Informally, the relevant term continued long after this date.

Readers old enough to have attended New South Wales schools during the 1960s will recollect persistent appearances of 'Empire Day' on calendars (and the international sporting events now known as the Commonwealth Games had the word 'Empire' in their title until 1966). Whilst much historiographical ink has been spilt over Britain's imperial collapse, two aspects of the phenomenon have been accorded insufficient coverage.

First and most striking of these aspects is the failure of the empire's dissolution to shape – let alone to convulse – politics on the home front (for all the frightful carnage which independence's arrival, in the shape of Indo-Pakistani partition, brought about). Churchill had indignantly proclaimed his refusal to 'preside over the liquidation of His Majesty [George VI]'s empire,' but events had left Clement Attlee, Prime Minister since 1945, with no choice save the liquidator's role. Britain's economy in 1947, prior to the Marshall Plan, existed on the sufferance of an American ruling class devoid of sentiment concerning the 'crown imperial'; and quashing India's independence movement required armed strength which Britain no longer mustered. When Churchill returned to power in 1951, he left the Attlee settlement intact. What is more, no partisans of British India tried to assassinate Attlee, as partisans of *Algérie Française* tried several times to assassinate Charles de Gaulle a decade and a half later. Nor did Britain's whole governmental system disintegrate under the burden of colonial resentment, as Portugal's would disintegrate in 1974.

The second striking aspect of the empire's end is the manner in which it glided almost insensibly into the Commonwealth's beginning. No obvious reason existed for why it should have done so. After all, the very word 'Commonwealth' still bore, in 1947, grim connotations of Cromwellian republicanism. But not solely those connotations: because eighteen years before Australia's six colonies federated in 1901, future British Prime Minister Lord Rosebery (during a speech given in Adelaide) had announced with prescience:

This is a country which has established itself as a nation. [...] Does the fact of your being a nation imply separation from the Empire? God forbid! There is no need for any nation, however great, leaving the Empire, because *the Empire is a Commonwealth of Nations* [italics in original].

And thus it eventually proved. Malcolm Muggeridge relished sneering about how ‘the empire on which the sun never sets’ had been superseded by ‘the Commonwealth on which the sun never rises.’ Events after 1947 gave Muggeridge the lie. The more noisily erstwhile colonial rebels had reprobated ‘perfidious Albion,’ the more frantically these rebels, once ensconced in power, lusted after invitations to Buckingham Palace. Seldom has the much-vaunted British ‘genius for muddling through’ attained a more improbable result. Interactions bound to wreck a more logical system of geopolitics became mere amusing eccentricities. One such meeting, which Australia’s elder statesman Sir Robert Menzies cited in his memoirs, acquired an added edge from Churchill’s alternations between sentience and senility. The aged warrior – two major strokes having left his hearing impaired but his thirst unabated – offered alcoholic refreshment to Pakistan’s visiting Prime Minister, Khawaja Nazimuddin:

‘Will you have a whisky and soda, Mr Prime Minister?’
‘No, thank you!’
‘What’s that?’
‘No, thank you!’
‘What, why?’
‘I’m a teetotaller, Sir Winston.’
‘What’s that?’
‘I’m a teetotaller.’
‘Christ! I mean God! I mean Allah!’

In much of the world, Churchill’s impious outburst would have caused whole armies to mobilise: whereas in the Commonwealth, it aroused only giggles. Something of the Commonwealth’s durability can be gleaned from its recent admission of states with no heritage of British rule: notably Mozambique (former Portuguese territory), Gabon (former French territory), Togo (likewise), and Rwanda (former Belgian territory). No-one bullied those countries into joining: they sought membership. Had the Commonwealth been the self-evident joke of Muggeridge’s imagination, this could not have occurred.

The Third Reich’s downfall had instilled in the British little if any hubris. Stevie Smith, that inimitable poetic singleton, refrained from gloating when she mused in verse (‘Voices Against England in the Night’) upon Goebbels’ Anglophobic invective. Her penultimate stanza aimed a tiny knife at the heart of Washington’s strategic self-esteem:

Perhaps England our darling will recover her lost thought,
We must think sensibly about our victory and not be distraught,
Perhaps America will have an idea, and perhaps not.



What did the Commonwealth mean in musical terms? It meant, for one thing, that novice musicians from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand remained far likelier to study in Britain than in the USA, or (as many of their grandparents had done) in Germany. Choral repertoires of cathedrals in Melbourne, Toronto, and Auckland were routinely simulacra of their British equivalents. London’s main music schools sent out examiners to the former colonies – to a limited extent they still do – and, at a more anecdotal level, talking with a Received Pronunciation accent long helped (before it began to hinder) candidates for academic employment within the Commonwealth. Two Englishmen, Edgar Bainton and Sir Eugene Goossens (both ex-students of Stanford), directed the post-war Sydney Conservatorium; a third, William Lovelock, directed its Brisbane equivalent. Australia’s concertgoers applauded Sir Malcolm Sargent’s

conducting at least as much as Britain's did. Queen Elizabeth II opened the long-delayed Sydney Opera House in 1973. English choirs, from King's College Cambridge to the Tallis Scholars, always tended to draw bigger Australian audiences than their North American or Continental European counterparts.

Such cultural kinship irked some. (According to the late Australian musicologist Roger Covell, in his 1967 survey *Australia's Music*, 'the English organist of the old school had his virtues, no doubt, but it is certain that Australia has made an unduly long acquaintance with him.') Nevertheless, since those who most hated colonialism by Britain frequently contrived to eulogise colonialism by the USSR, China, North Vietnam, Indonesia, or (above all) Hollywood – certain blithe adolescent spirits deliriously lauded all five imperialist powers at once – few heeded *bien-pensant* protests against the British connection. A surprisingly large number of Australians, until the 1970s, referred in conversation to Britain as 'home' even when they had not once set foot in it. When intercontinental aeroplane voyages become commonplace, one London suburb, Earl's Court, attracted so many antipodean expatriates as to sport the nickname 'Kangaroo Valley.' (In the sardonic words of Australian historian James Franklin: 'The Barry Humphries generation, oppressed by the dead hand of cultural cringe and hand-me-down Britishness in Australia, yearned to escape. To London.')

Among other things, the present disc mixes works composed in Britain with works composed in Australia and New Zealand. A certain family likeness links most of this CD's contents, transcending geographical distance and individual idiosyncrasies. Much of the music here is new to disc; all of it warrants attention, and can be assessed strictly on its merits, now that the twentieth century's furious battles over modernism have become almost as irrelevant to everyday artistic life as is the Thirty Years' War.



Devon-born **Henry Coleman (1888–1965)** wrote his *Festival March* in 1959, when the Queen's coronation was only six years past, and when there remained dozens of people who had known Elgar (dead since 1934) personally. Both factors left their identifiable impact on Coleman's piece, with its swashbuckling main tune, one that Elgar himself would have been pleased to invent. Unusually for an Englishman, Coleman obtained a doctorate in music from Dublin; his résumé also included tenure (1921–1944) as chief organist at Peterborough Cathedral.

A.E. (in full, Alfred Ernest) **Floyd (1877–1974)** hailed from Birmingham. Yet just as (in the quip associated with the Hibernian-reared Duke of Wellington) a man born in a stable fails thereby to become a horse, so Floyd achieved his greatest influence not in England but in Australia. For decades Floyd benevolently presided over Melbourne's musical life as chief organist at the city's Anglican cathedral (1915–1947), and a habitué of the Australian Broadcasting Commission's radio studios from the 1940s till his extreme old age. His *Three Church Preludes*, of which this recording contains the first, date from 1941 and probably derived from liturgical improvisations; but few improvisations ever matched No. 1's melodic appeal, suggesting a hitherto unsuspected Mendelssohn song without words.

Also in 1941, the BBC's religious broadcasting division found itself needing a tune which had the same metre as (not to mention comparable popular appeal to) Haydn's *Emperor's Hymn* and Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, but which avoided those tunes' inconvenient Teutonic origins. Fortunately, this division's employees included an Anglican clergyman, **Cyril Vincent Taylor (1907–1991)**, who himself created the required article. Taylor happened to live in Abbot's Leigh, near Bristol, and so he gave the village's name to his bold, soaring, diatonic melody, which has been fitted to several different texts over the years. The present organist has presumed to add a tiny (four-bar) concluding 'Amen' where the Great manual's trumpet stop reinforces Taylor's opening phrase.

Though born in Yorkshire, **George Oldroyd (1886–1951)** spent the last thirty-one years of his life as organist at the High Anglican church of St Michael's, Croydon, south London. A *prie-dieu* is a kneeler (usually made from wood) that allows a book to be placed in front of the kneeling person. It is associated

above all with Catholicism, but in *Le Prie-dieu: A Meditation* (1949) Oldroyd ingeniously combines two Lutheran melodies, which Bach made familiar via the *St Matthew Passion*. One is *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden* ('O sacred Head sore wounded'), written by Hans Leo Hassler around 1600 and originally incorporating secular words. The other melody is Bach's own *Erbarme dich, mein Gott* ('Have mercy, my God'), the soprano aria with violin obbligato from the *Passion's* Part II.

Undertones of War (AOR004, 2022), the present disc's predecessor, included *The Holy Boy* by **John Ireland (1879–1962)**, whose Piano Concerto and songs enjoyed substantial acclaim in his lifetime, though they are too much overlooked in our own day. Ireland, among Stanford's most able and devoted pupils, served as organist at various Anglican parishes in London before moving to Guernsey and filling a similar role at St Peter Port (in 1940 the Wehrmacht took over the Channel Islands, forcing the composer to return to the mainland). From 1944 comes his *Miniature Suite*, of which the opening movement, fittingly entitled *Intrada* ('entrée'), is included here. Its yearning, sequence-laden thematic vocabulary confirms Elgar's influence – and cannot a repeated Richard Strauss trait be detected in the climax's basis on a second-inversion tonic chord? – but the restrained close is pure Ireland: typical of a man whose output, be it ever so passionate, always eschewed harangues.

Dom Gregory Murray OSB (1905–1992), a Benedictine monk, directed music at Somerset's Downside Abbey. Although he wrote *A People's Mass* after the Second Vatican Council (this setting sold more than a million copies), his first musical love had been Gregorian chant, on which subject he published two scholarly volumes and gave several BBC broadcast talks. Between 1935 and 1987 he issued seven books of his own organ interludes; the one played here comes from the third book (1946). Now and then in these interludes, Murray explicitly quoted particular plainchants. More often, as with *Interlude XXXIX*, he preferred to communicate the genre's overall atmosphere. This miniature bespeaks intense sadness, its major key notwithstanding.

Unlike Floyd, **William G. James (1892–1977)** – the G stood for 'Garnet' – was actually Australian by birth (he came from Ballarat, Victoria's third-largest city). Like Floyd, he worked for much of his life at the Australian Broadcasting Commission. His curriculum vitae included collaborations with numerous leading musical names: Sir Henry Wood, Sir Thomas Beecham, Dame Nellie Melba, the baritone John Brownlee, and the soprano Toti Dal Monte. However much he would have preferred to be remembered for these estimable labours, or for his operetta *The Golden Girl*, his wider fame rests exclusively on his delightful Christmas carols, which filled the need for Yuletide tributes *not* describing the northern hemisphere's December snows. Poet John Wheeler crammed into *Carol of the Birds* (1948) references to almost every imaginable form of avian life in the antipodes. ('Orana' is said to be an indigenous word meaning 'welcome.') James possessed a remarkable knack for producing what later generations have called 'earworms': the entirely diatonic *Carol of the Birds* is apt to stay in one's head for hours after a first hearing.

Anybody who peruses 1940s-1950s back-numbers of Britain's *Radio Times* will encounter the name of Londoner **Leslie Woodgate (1900–1961)**, largely forgotten since. Woodgate composed less than he should have done, preferring to concentrate upon teaching (in person as well as via numerous textbooks) and choral conducting. The fact that he led the BBC Chorus in the world première of Poulenc's Resistance hymn *Figure Humaine* – a work so difficult to sing in tune that many choristers would willingly catch the plague to avoid undertaking it – proves his skill. Nothing of Poulenc, though, characterises Woodgate's austere heroic 1951 *Impromptu*, Op. 20 No. 1, which comes much closer to Walton (especially in the fanfares that frame it) and to Hindemith (in the central section's ascetic, curiously menacing three-part polyphony).

John Longmire (1902–1986), originally a Lincolnshire man, wrote the first biography of John Ireland and was employed primarily as pedagogue at various schools: for the most part in England, but from 1951 to 1954 in New Zealand, at Auckland's Northcote College. There he wrote in 1953, with the school's students – and probably with local Coronation revelries – in mind, the anthem *O life that makest*

all things new. He set optimistic words by Samuel Longfellow (words sometimes misattributed, including by Longmire himself, to Samuel's better-known brother Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Hiawatha's* creator). Longmire's music combines a main theme sung in unison – the theme's second phrase distinctly, though accidentally, recalls Vaughan Williams's hymn tune *Sine Nomine* – with a higher, more agile, soprano line.

If Hindemith's example has an audible effect on the Woodgate piece, it positively saturates another organ *Impromptu*: this one (from 1967) by the near-centenarian **Arnold Cooke (1906–2005)**, who actually studied with Hindemith in Berlin during the Weimar Republic, and whose ability to mimic his teacher's voice – when, as here, he wanted to – was so acute as to inspire fears of outright plagiarism. The imperturbable counterpoint, the unfailing aversion to voluptuousness, the preoccupation (melodic as well as harmonic) with the interval of the fourth: all these essential features of the German master's idiom are here. Had Hindemith contemplated writing a fourth organ sonata, it would have sounded like this. Cooke's other compositions, numbering more than a hundred, include the soundtrack (now, alas, lost) to a 1948 documentary film about the Colorado beetle.

Sharing Oldroyd's Yorkshire origins, **Gordon Slater (1896–1979)** combined duties as organist (chiefly at Lincoln Cathedral for an impressive thirty-five years, 1931–1966) with lecturing in music at the universities of Hull, Nottingham, and Sheffield. At least twice, before and after World War II, he visited Canada to adjudicate at festivals there. His hymn melody *Bilsdale* continues to be used on occasion. Another hymn melody, this time from the Elizabethan epoch (*Cheshire*), forms the basis of the organ prelude here included, which dates from 1950. The prelude's repeated fondness for triads a minor third apart – a manoeuvre much cultivated in Reger's organ pieces, several of those being still quite well known in 1950 among English organists – emphasises the preponderant effect of eeriness. It comes close to anticipating (of all improbable conceptions) the original signature-tune for *Doctor Who*, with which it shares the key of E minor.

Like Longmire, **Christopher Steel (1939–1991)** spent years as a school music teacher – in his case chiefly within Gloucestershire and Berkshire – though his decision to follow his initial Royal Academy of Music training with lessons in Munich implies considerable independence of spirit. So, for that matter, does the style of his organ works: markedly dissonant for all their clear tonal centres, and at times containing hints of the grotesque, these hints being unmistakable in his drably named *Dance* from 1974. (*Dance* constitutes the fourth movement of a six-movement collection, which bears the equally humdrum title *Six Pieces*. Some composers manage to be their own worst enemies when it comes to devising attractive nomenclature.) Abounding in major-versus-minor triadic clashes, and in circles of fifths which are apt to become circles of sevenths, *Dance* sounds more French than English. It will remind few listeners of Steel's compatriots, but Roussel, Milhaud, and Honegger clearly lurk in the general neighbourhood.

More identifiably British is another anthem, this time not by Longmire but by **Alec Rowley (1892–1958)**, who, along with Ireland, was heard on *Undertones of War*. While Rowley's large work-list includes two piano concertos and at least two Mass settings, most of it – perhaps all the very best of it – is cast in small forms. Nothing wrong with that: an inspired miniature is much more valuable to the human race than an uninspired symphony. *Sing to the Lord* (1944), set to excerpts from the Psalms and intended specifically for Anglican parishes in the harvesting season, reveals how a resourceful composer can make personnel limitations into active artistic strengths. As wartime manpower shortages precluded elaborate choral harmonies, Rowley adheres throughout to vocal unisons, and evades the slightest sense of dullness, not least through a markedly chromatic organ part.

This CD's rampageous finale is *The Queen's Procession*, written in the very year (1952) when Elizabeth II ascended the throne. Its creator had, by any criterion, the most unusual background of any composer here represented. He was **Oliphant** (in full, Soorjo Alexander William Langobard Oliphant) **Chuckerbutty (1884–1960)**. Even the shortened version of his name suggests a P.G. Wodehouse character, and provokes visions of Bertie Wooster and Bingo Little throwing bread at their fellow Drones

Club members. In fact, though Chuckerbutty spent all his life in England, his ethnic origins were Parsi ('Chakravaty' having been his surname's original form). And despite officiating for years as ecclesiastical organist – initially at Southwark's Anglican cathedral – he stood out from most of his organ-loft colleagues in a stylistic as well as a racial sense: he ran a much-acclaimed dance band, and performed repeatedly in cinemas. That he mastered the demotic touch, *The Queen's Procession* repeatedly shows. Its rapid preludial modulations evoke the scene-setting bustle of many a J. Arthur Rank film. Not one but *two* themes of neo-Elgarian eloquence dominate the main section. Of these, the first, in C major, enters surprisingly quietly. The second theme inhabits F major and is given twice. Near the end, the C major theme returns, in a treatment which for sheer grandiose fervour surpasses even the preceding climax. And could those subsequent repeated, unannounced syncopations be allusions to Jamaican popular song, then enjoying a surge of English popularity in the wake of wholesale West Indian immigration? Whatever their purpose, they are followed by rapid scalic flourishes and great crashing tonic chords. The procession has arrived.

Chuckerbutty's homage has lost none of its éclat in a year when Charles III underwent his Westminster Abbey crowning before approximately 400 million pairs, around the world, of television-watching eyeballs. This crowning's musical content hinted at often unsuspected reserves of cultural robustness in the land where it occurred, robustness which calls to mind the words by – of all anti-royalist poets – Milton:

Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks.

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