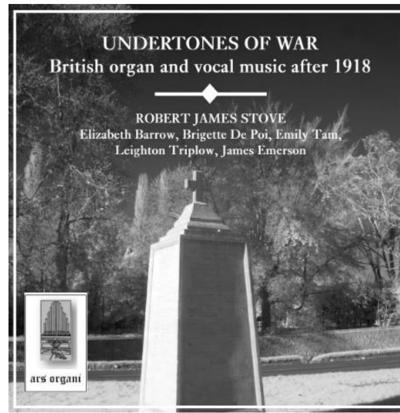

Booklet Notes

WHAT PASSING BELLS for those who die as cattle? … / The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall: / Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds, / And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.' Thus the prophetic Wilfred Owen. The carnage from 1914 to 1918 left scarcely a single household in Britain untouched. As American journalist and historian Edmond Taylor put it: 'World War I killed fewer victims than World War II, destroyed fewer buildings, and uprooted millions instead of tens of millions, but in many ways it left even deeper scars both on the mind and on the map of Europe.'

Why – judging by the histories of literature and music – does the spiritual toll seem to have been harsher on the British than on any other European race? After all, Britain lost fewer soldiers than France and Austria-Hungary, let alone Russia and Germany. The answer lies in two factors that made Britain's Great War effort unique in Europe.

First, the innate stability of British political institutions meant a lack of opportunities for citizens to work off their war-neuroses by revolutionary activism, as agitators did on the Continent. In the Hohenzollern and Habsburg empires, the equivalents to Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg and Siegfried Sassoon were far less likely to be writing anti-war poems than to be advocating direct political revolt. (Even in France, most anti-war writing came from outspoken left-wingers, notably Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland.)

Second, Britain, alone among the European belligerents, had no tradition of conscription. To a Frenchman, a Russian, or an Italian, the war, however nightmarish, possessed a clear relationship to memories of enforced military service. By contrast, before 1914 all attempts to conscript young male Britons had failed, even when such revered soldiers as Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener backed them. Overwhelmingly Britain preferred contracting out war (and war's preparations) to real-life counterparts of Kipling's Tommy Atkins, somewhere east of Suez or south of the Sahara.

Amid the first upsurge of British public enthusiasm for the cause, conscription hardly seemed needful. Before Christmas 1914, half a million men volunteered to serve. But as the war dragged on, even this prodigious volunteer intake no longer sufficed. Still the

British government resisted imposing full national service until 1916. Thereafter the Great War became, in its hideous manner, much the most *egalitarian* experience that the average British male had ever undergone: and yet, an experience automatically incommunicable to civilians, save by an allusion here, a metaphor there. No wonder it generated such psychological aftershocks in those who endured it. Poet Edmund Blunden called his autobiography *Undertones of War*, from which phrase this CD takes its name.

Down the decades, the aftershocks reverberated. In 1964 a British television series, called simply *The Great War,* included interviews with survivors of the Dardanelles, Salonika, and the Western Front. It is sobering to realise that those battlefields were closer in time to mid-1960s viewers than are the conflicts of Vietnam, Laos, Katanga, and Biafra to us in 2022.

Inevitably 1914–1918 affected British music's content and character, albeit seldom in an obvious fashion and never in a demagogic one. To 'Tommies' in the trenches with a life-expectancy of weeks or months, 'England's green and pleasant land' seemed unbearably far-off; and distance lent enchantment. Before 1914, A.E. Housman's tender versified pastorals had remained, among musicians, a minority taste. After 1918 they attracted no fewer than four hundred musical settings, most of them written between the wars. Uncounted Shropshire Lads had disappeared in the mud of Pozières and Passchendaele. (Housman himself, sad to relate, loathed music and was tone-deaf.)

Often the use of folk-tunes – and, more frequently, folk-tune-like themes with a clear modal foundation – during the inter-war period would coexist with a lush harmonic chromaticism that owed something to Wagner, something to Delius, and something to Britain's belated discovery of Franck, but a surprising amount to Gershwin. (If you play *The Man I Love* or *Embraceable You* at funereal speeds on an organ, while blurring most of Gershwin's rhythms, the result sounds remarkably like certain 1930s sacred pieces.) Such harmonies would have been blue-pencilled by many an Edwardian pedagogue; now they came into their own, and lastingly enlarged the British musical lexicon.

Not all composers adopted them. The Leipzig-trained **Basil Harwood (1859–1949)** showed that straightforward Edwardian self-confidence still had, in artistic terms, much to offer. By 1900 Harwood had already become one of Britain's most respected organist-composers, above all thanks to his First Organ Sonata. Affluent enough to inspire fellow organists' envy by retiring from performance when only fifty years old – later he managed his family's Gloucestershire country house – he nonetheless continued composing into advanced age. His *Diapason Movement* from 1935, a veritable *sursum corda*, shares its three-note opening theme (characterised by a falling major seventh) with a *Voluntary in G* written in the 1750s by William Walond of Oxford. This piece E. Power Biggs made quite famous during the mid-twentieth century; could Harwood have encountered Walond's creation before Biggs popularised it? Anyway, the chromatic progressions of Harwood's brief developmental section conjure up Reger as well as Franck, while in the closing bars the three-note motif moves to the pedals.

Uniquely in Britain's annals, **Sir Walter Galpin Alcock (1861–1947)** acted as Westminster Abbey organist at no fewer than three coronations: those of Edward VII (1902), George V (1911), and George VI (1937). Alcock's *Introduction and Passacaglia* is

still heard now and then; his other pieces much less so. With the voluntary included here (first from a 1925 set of twelve), Edwardian panache gives way to a gentle, Franckian chromatic disquiet.

Sir Richard Runciman Terry (1864–1938), stormiest among British musicology's petrels, earned his greatest renown from his tenure (1901–1924) as Westminster Cathedral's music director. He introduced the cathedral's choristers and congregations not only to the Palestrina school, but to the Latin-rite music of Tudor England. In the *Westminster Hymnal*, which he edited, he incorporated a marvellous hymn-tune of his own: *Highwood*, named after the Oxfordshire estate owned by his aristocratic uncle. Though the *Westminster Hymnal* appeared in 1912, *Highwood* is included here on a technicality: only after 1918 did the melody become linked to its present words (wonderfully apposite to the tune, in their sheer exultation) by Anglican clergyman F.W.H. Myers.

Coupled forever, it would seem, in conjoined-twin historiographical status with Sir Hubert Parry is the Dublin-born **Sir Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924)**. The organ output of Stanford stretches from the 1870s to the early 1920s. *At Eventide*, from his *Six Occasional Preludes*, dates from 1921 but was published posthumously. Its impressionistic qualities and generous employment of harmonic suspensions indicate a French influence. This recording is the first to use the new Oxford University Press edition, which appeared only in February 2021, and which corrects the original edition's chordal misprints.

Nowadays the fame of **John Ireland (1879–1962)** is not what it once was, when his Piano Concerto enjoyed almost Rachmaninoffian popularity at the London Proms, and when numerous song recitals included examples of his œuvre (customarily his settings of John Masefield's *Sea Fever* and of Thomas Lovell Beddoes' *If there were dreams to sell*). But Ireland's *The Holy Boy* – originally intended in 1913 for piano, though Ireland afterwards arranged it by turns for voice with keyboard, string orchestra, string quartet, and choir – continues to be remembered. The words, which superbly fit the vocal part's contour, came long after the music. Written in 1938, they are by the composer's solicitor, Herbert S. Brown.

That the 1922 *Andante grazioso* of **Alan Gray (1855–1935)** resembles Stanford's music should come as no surprise, because Gray and Stanford had a long friendship, and each man dedicated several works to the other. When Stanford resigned from the organist's post at Trinity College, Cambridge, Gray succeeded him. Especially Stanfordian is Gray's use here of a brief melodic-rhythmic cell as the entire work's basis: in this case, a syncopated fragment connoting a barcarolle. Near the end, during a protracted dominant pedal-point, occurs a sudden (if discreet) warming of the emotional temperature, in which connection we should note that the Great War had claimed the lives of Gray's two sons.

Peter Warlock (pen-name of Philip Heseltine, 1894–1930), drunkard, occultist, periodically libellous polemicist, but with intense musical gifts that make the word 'genius' understandable, excelled in small forms. Critic Hubert Foss described him in treasurable similes: 'He had the delicacy of the hot-house plant and the ebullience of the

willow-herb that grows on ruined bomb-sites.' Both features distinguish his 1923 carol *Adam lay ybounden,* set to anonymous, macaronic words from the Middle Ages. While the restless keyboard modulations illustrate the composer's esteem for Delius, only Warlock could have conceived the final phrase's dazzling chordal starburst.

Like Terry, Ireland, and other British musicians of his time, **Thomas F. Dunhill (1877–1946)** took composition lessons from Stanford. Although he achieved his greatest celebrity as a professor and examiner, his own music – which includes *Tantivy Towers*, a comic opera to a libretto by A.P. Herbert, as well as numerous piano works – frequently retains an appealing freshness. (Alas, it enriched him much less than tobacco enriched his brother Alfred, who founded the Dunhill cigarette company.) Originally the composer wrote his three *Chiddingfold Pieces* for string orchestra in 1922, but two years afterwards he arranged all three of them for organ. On the present disc, rather than being played consecutively, they are interspersed with vocal works, in the interests of timbral variation. Chiddingfold, by the bye, is a village approximately fifty kilometres to London's south-west. The set's first piece bears the Latin name 'Canticum Fidei' and alludes to plainchant; whether by conscious design or otherwise, it shares its first four notes with one of the two standard Gregorian melodies for *Salve Regina*. In general the piece's style suggests Respighi's *Church Windows,* which, curiously, did not appear till 1926. Then comes a grim march, 'The Warrior's Daughter,' abounding in open fifths and bearing an epigraph harking back to Saxon times; here the music resembles Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's once popular *Hiawatha*. Another somewhat Respighian miniature finishes Dunhill's set: 'The Vision of Richard Peyto,' where the epigraph salutes the erstwhile importance of Chiddingfold's glassworks. (For both epigraphs, see the 'Epigraphs and Sung Texts' section on pages 12–14.) The ending in B flat major possesses an exceptional opulence.

Few biographical data illuminate Scotland's **Norman Fulton (1909–1980)**. He did write, along with several other British composers, recorder music in response to commissions by Carl Dolmetsch. Also, he contributed the tiny carol *Released by Love* to *The Cambridge Hymnal* of 1967, compiled by **Elizabeth Poston (1905–1987)** in collaboration with literary critic David Holbrook. From this hymnal, Poston's own *Christmas Day* also comes. Fulton uses an unobtrusive keyboard ostinato to accompany two canonic voices, with results implying neo-mediaeval minimalism. The words which he sets are by W.H. Auden, in maturity an unambiguous Christian, who had been shocked out of his youthful atheism through the spectacle of abundant ruined and desecrated churches under Spain's 1936–1939 communist-controlled regime. Poston's piece shows that her creative gifts by no means ended with her much-anthologised *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*. Marked by a pentatonic vocal line and by (for the most part) a 5/4 pulse, *Christmas Day* uses naïve but vivid stanzas by Andrew John Young, a Scottish Presbyterian minister.

'Cheerful agnosticism' was how the Bunyan-loving, hymnal-compiling, Mass-composing **Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)** claimed to summarise his religious views; it is a self-description as unconvincing as is Bach's maxim 'Work as hard as I do and you will do as well as I do.' Vaughan Williams began his *Five Mystical Songs,* to glorious texts by George Herbert, in 1906. But though he initially envisaged them with

chorus and orchestra as well as (baritone) vocal soloist – in this format they were first heard at Worcester, during the Three Choirs Festival of 1911 – he later arranged them for piano. *The Call*, fourth of the set, has been recorded elsewhere with organ instead of piano; the organ is better matched than the piano to the music's sustained chords. Vaughan Williams' love of parallel triads generating consecutive fifths (those fifths would have shocked his teacher Stanford) is never more hauntingly displayed than in this setting of Herbert's poem, only a single word of which contains more than one syllable.

Among the hundred-odd pieces which **Alec Rowley (1892–1958)** left behind him, the openly didactic part of his output has done the most to keep his memory alive: it includes much music for piano duet as well as for solo piano. His thorough grasp of the organ's capabilities – he had become a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists when only twenty-two – is obvious from his *Three Quiet Preludes*. While the first prelude lives up to the set's title by staying calmly regretful all through, Rowley endows with considerable fervour the climaxes in the second prelude (which is slightly fey and balletic) as well as the third (neo-Elgarian in idiom). All three preludes, dating from 1937, demonstrate an exceptional melodic inventiveness.

School inspector **Geoffrey Turton Shaw (1879–1943)**, yet another Stanford student, was the brother of Martin Shaw (best known for his championship of Christmas carols), and also the father of actor Sebastian Shaw (who played Anakin Skywalker in *Return of the Jedi*). Geoffrey contributed in abundance to a genre popular in Britain during the 1920s and 1930s: the unison song for massed choir, often piano-accompanied. Belonging to this now forgotten repertoire – which awaits its historian – is the present (1932) treatment of Milton's Yuletide lines. Few composers since Parry have dared to set Milton at all. Still fewer have approached the poet's own 'verbal music.' The latter improbable feat Geoffrey Turton Shaw here achieves with his martial Aeolian melody, swaggering yet nowhere cheap; his keyboard part, like the one in *The Call*, contains so many sustained notes as to cry out for that organ performance to which Milton's own words allude.

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