

## **Agincourt**

**George Dyson (1883 - 1964)**

Dyson's time as Director of Music at Winchester College (1924 - 1937) were particularly fruitful. Here he composed several substantial works, including *In Honour of the City* (1928), *The Canterbury Pilgrims* (1931) - his most well known choral work - and, for the Three Choirs Festival, *St Paul's Voyage to Melita* (1933) and *Nebuchadnezzar* (1935). In addition to these large-scale works Dyson produced many part-songs, and it was these that first brought him to the attention of the Petersfield Musical Festival. Such was his popularity that from 1927 until his death in 1964 scarcely a year passed without one of his pieces being included. It was entirely appropriate, therefore, that the Festival should commission a work from Dyson to celebrate its Golden Jubilee in 1956. His response was the colourful cantata, *Agincourt*.

It was principally during his time at Winchester that Dyson developed his musical style, which grew out of the tradition established by Parry and Elgar. Cheerfully ignoring the radical innovations sweeping across Europe, his tuneful, vigorous music won him many admirers, and his works for chorus and orchestra were enthusiastically taken up by societies up and down the country. In later years, however, his conservatism became increasingly at odds with the prevailing artistic climate and his music fell into almost total neglect, apart from some of his cathedral music and occasional performances of *The Canterbury Pilgrims*. Thankfully, with the more tolerant and inclusive spirit of recent years, the works of Dyson and others are being heard once more. The music of *Agincourt* is direct, vivid, energetic and melodic; qualities that appeal as much today as they did in Dyson's heyday.

The work is in six contrasting sections, linked by short orchestral introductions. The text is largely from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, with the 15<sup>th</sup>-century *Hymn after Agincourt* forming the concluding part. The majestic first section begins with a brilliant opening flourish, very much in the manner of William Walton. This leads to an energetic second section, 'Now all the youth of England are on fire', describing the preparations for the battle with the French. The voyage across the Channel is the subject of the next episode, with an evocative portrayal of surging seas that echoes Vaughan Williams' *Sea Symphony* of 1910. The tense fourth section, 'Now creeping murmur', is a ghostly nocturne, introduced by eerie orchestral sounds. The sopranos and altos then set the scene for the forthcoming battle, and the tenors and basses respond with the famous St Crispin's Day speech, containing the well-known words, 'We few, we happy few, we band of brothers...'. For the final part Dyson wisely decides not to try and portray the battle itself, but moves on instead into the victorious 'Hymn after Agincourt', thought to date from 1415, the year of the actual Battle of Agincourt. With each successive verse this rousing tune increases in fervour until it reaches a triumphant finale.

*programme notes by John Bawden*

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