

## ***Intimations of Immortality***

**Gerald Finzi (1901 - 1956)**

A series of tragedies profoundly affected Finzi in his early years. By the time he was eighteen he had lost his father, three elder brothers and his much-loved music teacher, killed in action. This dreadful sequence of events, and the appalling losses of the First World War that formed the backdrop to his adolescence, gave Finzi an acute awareness of the impermanence of life, confirmed with grim finality when at the age of fifty he discovered that he was dying of leukaemia. These experiences to a large extent account for the hint of melancholy underlying much of his music, heard particularly in the many fine Hardy songs, the superb cantata *Dies Natalis*, for solo voice and strings (a setting of words by Traherne), the *Seven poems of Robert Bridges* and the Ode *Intimations of Immortality*.

Finzi led a solitary life until his mid-twenties, finding peace and quiet satisfaction in the countryside and immersing himself in poetry and literature. He was exceptionally well read and over the years amassed a valuable collection of some 3000 volumes of English poetry, literature and philosophy, now housed in the Finzi Book Room at Reading University. His favourite writers were Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Traherne and in particular, Hardy, in whose introspective verse he found a kindred spirit. In 1926 Finzi moved to London, where he quickly became part of a group of composers that included Vaughan Williams, Holst, Arthur Bliss, Edmund Rubbra, Robin Milford and, most importantly, Howard Ferguson, with whom he formed a lifelong friendship.

Finzi's music springs from his love of literature and the English countryside - the same sources that inspired Elgar and Vaughan Williams. Like them he found writing vocal music particularly satisfying. In fact, about two-thirds of his entire output is either for chorus or solo voice. His music is immediately recognisable by its yearning melodies and wistful harmonies, and his instinctive feeling for the English language is exceptional, the natural speech-rhythms and cadences of his musical lines complementing perfectly each chosen text.

*Intimations of Immortality* was first performed at the Three Choirs Festival, Gloucester, in September 1950, conducted by Herbert Sumsion. It is one of Finzi's most substantial works and is scored for full orchestra, tenor solo and chorus. Wordsworth's Ode, subtitled '*from recollections of early childhood*' is a lament for the lost joys and intuitive wonder of childhood. The work begins with an ethereal horn call, representing the 'intimations of immortality' themselves. A second, broad theme forms the musical basis for the first and second verses. An animated *allegro* orchestral passage introduces verses three and four, with their dancing images of spring. The horn call is heard again before verses five, six and nine (Finzi omitted Wordsworth's seventh and eighth verses), in which the central theme of lost innocence is addressed, and hope offered. The earlier *allegro* returns for the tenth stanza, followed by the broad theme heard early on in the piece. The final section concludes with a poignant reiteration of the horn call, which then fades away into contemplative silence. Finzi uses the tenor solo, chorus and orchestra in many subtle combinations, rather as an artist might mix his colours in varying shades, reflecting the constantly changing nuances of Wordsworth's evocative poem.

*programme notes by John Bawden*

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There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.  
It is not now as it hath been of yore; --  
Turn whereso'er I may,  
By night or day,  
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

The Rainbow comes and goes,  
And lovely is the Rose,  
The Moon doth with delight  
Look round her when the heavens are bare;  
Waters on a starry night  
Are beautiful and fair;  
The sunshine is a glorious birth;  
But yet I know, where'er I go,  
That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,  
And while the young lambs bound  
As to the tabor's sound,  
To me alone there came a thought of grief:  
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,  
And I again am strong:  
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;  
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;  
I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,  
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,  
And all the earth is gay;  
Land and sea  
Give themselves up to jollity,  
And with the heart of May  
Doth every Beast keep holiday;--  
Thou Child of Joy,  
Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy  
Shepherd-boy!

Ye blessed Creatures, I have heard the call  
Ye to each other make; I see  
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;  
My heart is at your festival,  
My head hath its coronal,  
The fulness of your bliss, I feel - I feel it all.  
Oh evil day! if I were sullen  
While Earth herself is adorning,  
This sweet May-morning,  
And the Children are culling  
On every side,  
In a thousand valleys far and wide,  
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,  
And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm:--  
I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!  
But there's a Tree, of many, one,  
A single Field which I have looked upon,  
Both of them speak of something that is gone:  
The Pansy at my feet  
Doth the same tale repeat:  
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,

Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home:  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!  
Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
Upon the growing Boy,  
But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,  
He sees it in his joy;  
The Youth, who daily farther from the east  
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,  
And by the vision splendid  
Is on his way attended;  
At length the Man perceives it die away,  
And fade into the light of common day.

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;  
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,  
And, even with something of a Mother's mind,  
And no unworthy aim,  
The homely Nurse doth all she can  
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,  
Forget the glories he hath known,  
And that imperial palace whence he came.

O joy! that in our embers  
Is something that doth live,  
That nature yet remembers  
What was so fugitive!  
The thought of our past years in me doth breed  
Perpetual benediction: not indeed  
For that which is most worthy to be blest;  
Delight and liberty, the simple creed  
Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,  
With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast:-  
Not for these I raise  
The song of thanks and praise;  
But for those obstinate questionings  
Of sense and outward things,  
Fallings from us, vanishings;  
Blank misgivings of a Creature  
Moving about in worlds not realised,  
High instincts before which our mortal Nature  
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised:  
But for those first affections;  
Those shadowy recollections,  
Which, be they what they may,  
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,  
Are yet a master light of all our seeing;  
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make  
Our noisy years seem moments in the being  
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,  
To perish never;  
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,

Nor man nor Boy,  
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,  
Can utterly abolish or destroy!  
Hence in a season of calm weather  
Though inland far we be,  
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea  
Which brought us hither,  
Can in a moment travel thither,  
And see the Children sport upon the shore,  
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!  
And let the young Lambs bound  
As to the tabor's sound!  
We in thought will join your throng,  
Ye that pipe and ye that play,  
Ye that through your hearts to-day  
Feel the gladness of the May!  
What though the radiance which was once so bright  
Be now forever taken from my sight,  
Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;  
We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind;  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be;  
In the soothing thoughts that spring  
Out of human suffering;  
In the faith that looks through death,  
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,  
Forebode not any severing of our loves!  
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;  
I only have relinquished one delight  
To live beneath your more habitual sway.  
I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,  
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;  
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day  
Is lovely yet;  
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun  
Do take a sober colouring from an eye  
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;  
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.  
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,  
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,  
To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

*William Wordsworth*